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Clyde Caldwell



*Step right up to the greatest show
in the Universe — where defying death
means something very special...*

McPETER'S INTERGALACTIC CIRCUS

by
John Kelly

The light blue rays of the rising sun slowly illuminated the bogs. The spotlights were snapped off, no longer needed. The tent still wasn't raised; Carson, the crew chief, watched nervously as the hydraulic lift lowered the last tent spike, and three roadies guided it into place. Then the press pounded it into the bog, until all but the last meter was submerged. All forty spikes in place, the base was finally secured, and the roadies prepared to raise the plastic roof.

Carson checked his watch, and sighed. They were behind schedule, but they'd probably make it in time. Still, he didn't like it. They shouldn't have to stop at all these backwater bogworlds any more, especially the ones without decent arenas. He didn't care if

they did sell out, no matter what the charge. It was too much of a chore to raise this old tent for a one night stand.

Someone rapped sharply on his door. "It's time."

He threw down the makeup brush and swung on his cape. Swiftly out of his dressing room and down the unlit ramp, he paused at the tunnel's edge. He checked his beard, smooth and pointed, and his hair, in place. The makeup was right — he'd made sure of that before he left the dressing room. He hitched and shook his shoulders to straighten his cape. He was ready. Helena was late as always, damn her.

He was Merlin, the Knife Thrower.

He hated this business.

Back in another dressing room, KaJamie, the Animal Tamer, echoed his sentiments. He dressed slowly, deliberately, deep in thought. He glanced at his watch. Still over an hour to go. He wished it was longer. He wished it was forever.

KaJamie hated the circus, but he hated tonight most of all.

It was his turn tonight.

McPeter, the ringmaster, strode to center ring and looked up at the audience. This was a good crowd, but then, Alpha Ceti always turned out for a show. "And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have a special treat for you," he boomed. "Direct from Earth — yes! the Home Planet! — I bring you Merlin, knife thrower *par excellence*, and his wife, Helena!"

The applause began, the spotlights danced, and Merlin and Helena stepped out of the tunnel into the lights. The ovation crescendoed as they strutted to center ring.

Merlin was dressed in scarlet, right to the tip of his cape. His coal black beard and sharply-peaked hairline made him seem majestic and threatening, even murderous, in the glare of the spotlights. He had the bearing and style of a master, and the aura carried even to the back rows of the big tent.

His knives flashed as brightly as the sequins on Helena's costume. From thirty meters away, he threw

them so close to her that they seemed to merge with the silver of her dress. The crowd buzzed with excitement as the knives leapt off his fingertips, the special forbidden death wish at the edge of everyone's thoughts. They trembled and gasped with the secret thrill of it; they sat poised on the edges of their seats, every one waiting for a slip of his hand, hoping that the force of their tension might somehow produce it.

KaJamie finally finished dressing. *I've still got time*, he thought, as he stared at the wall of his cubicle. For want of something better to do, he took a set of darts from his trunk and started aiming them at the back of his door. He pretended the plastic door was McPeter.

Merlin hated as he threw his knives. Hated Helena because she made him do this, had pushed him into the circus life. Hated the travel. Hated the stupid names they had to assume to please the public. But most of all, he hated the audience, the silent mob he felt trying to guide his movements.

Another knife flew. The audience gasped. Close. But not close enough.

I can hear you, you vultures, he thought as he threw another of the shining daggers. *You're begging me to kill her. Slip, miss, scream, suffer, give us the real show. Sorry*, he thought, flinging a knife with

special fury. *Not tonight, not tonight.*

KaJamie opened the door to his cubicle and motioned to a nearby roadie.

"How much time before I go on?"

"An hour at least. We're behind tonight. Ah . . . good luck." The roadie shuffled his feet. "Good luck tonight, kid."

KaJamie closed the door. He noticed he was shaking.

Merlin threw his last knife, did his last stunt, split his last cigarette. He and Helena took their bows and danced out of the spotlights. Somehow the applause at the end of an act was never quite as furious as the applause at the beginning.

They went straight back to their dressing room, where they would stay until the finale. They wanted to be far away when KaJamie made his entrance.

KaJamie was sweating. His tail twitched uncontrollably. God, he hated the circus.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Ladies and Gentlemen, it brings me great pleasure to introduce to you now KaJamie, animal tamer unparalleled, the man-thing from Carsten-son's Planet. His father was a Spacer, his mother a she-thing aborigine of that planet, and their son — well, he is the greatest animal tamer in the universe. KaJamie has

assembled here tonight some of the most dangerous creatures in existence: the Folsom's dragon, from Beta IX; the octobeast from Arronai; the tiger, representing mother Earth; and the most feared of all, the sabered griffin of KaJamie's home planet. KaJamie is the only animal tamer, living or dead, who has even attempted to tame this awesome beast. Without further ado, here is KaJamie!"

The crowd roared, the spotlights flashed all around the mouth of the tunnel, but KaJamie didn't come out.

"Come on, get out there!" Carson yelled in his ear from behind him. "Don't get cold feet now! I don't hear you complaining when it's other people's turns!" He pushed KaJamie into the spotlights.

KaJamie walked forward as if in a trance. He was short, dark, and furry, his shoulders small and hunched. His face was catlike, with fur-covered cheeks and long, translucent whiskers. His long thin tail writhed behind him. They had dressed him in what he considered a clownsuit — silver-sequined black satin — but he was beyond caring.

McPeter met him at the gate to the cage. "Don't let me down, kid," he said, out of the side of his mouth. He shoved the electrostatic whip and charge-prod into the six-fingered, thumbless hands at the end of KaJamie's slender arms.

KaJamie took the gun from the ringmaster with his tail. The cage door swung open, and he stepped inside to wait for the animals.

His was the worst act to have to perform. Everyone else had it easier. When it was their turn, they only had to take falls, or knife wounds. *Just look what I have to suffer*, KaJamie thought, as the tiger was released into the cage.

KaJamie cracked the whip, the sparks flew, and the big cat took his place on the blocks. He was the easiest to handle, the tamest. But even he snapped and snarled tonight.

The octobeast ran in. The largest of the animals, and the strongest, it was bear-like, but elongated, like a centipede. Its face was dominated by a heavy curved beak. It only growled when the whip snapped, and KaJamie had to chase it with the prod to get it onto its stand. Bad, very bad. KaJamie knew it was going to be a hard night. The worst, of course.

Next was Folsom's dragon, with its slashing meter-long tail and mouth like an alligator's. He was small, compared to the others, but still as big as KaJamie, and deadly quick. It was said that when men first came to Beta IX, the dragons didn't flee from the ships, as did the other indigenous creatures. They attacked, and had the ships fleeing within a week. That is, had fleeing the ones which could still fly.

The dragon refused to move under the whip, and when chased with the prod, merely circled. This scared KaJamie, because he hated to turn his back on the other animals. He did the only thing he could — he jammed the dragon with the prod. It screamed and writhed in pain. Immediately the other animals growled and snapped, and jumped off their stands. KaJamie retreated to the fence, shouting as he cracked the whip. To his immense relief, the animals calmed, and returned to their stands. Even the dragon joined them. He was saved, but with a sinking feeling he remembered that it was only for the moment, and that tonight was his turn.

The sabered griffin flew in. It resembled almost exactly the fabled cross between eagle and lion; it was strong, fast, and intelligent. Its feet and claws were bigger than KaJamie's head. It was the worst of all to handle, but by cracking the whip and screaming, KaJamie managed to keep it under control — barely.

He led the animals through the tricks, the stands, the jumps, all the games he had so painstakingly taught them. The animals could sense the difference between KaJamie and the purebred men; he was closer to them than any man could ever be. They did things for him that they would do for no human — he could even ride on the

back of the octobeast. But neither they nor he ever forgot that he ruled only by whip and prod. And tonight was the night he was supposed to drop them. It was his turn.

Damn it, he thought. Even Gregorio has it better; even being burned is better.

His chances came, but he didn't take them. Damn his pay. They could leave him behind. He didn't care. Because deep inside him, in his gut, a hope was boiling up. A hope that maybe, just maybe, he could get away without doing it tonight. A mauling was such an awful thing.

Suddenly, he heard a click, and he could no longer feel the purr of his electric prod. He looked down. It was no longer glowing. He shook it and pounded it on his leg, but the power didn't return.

The animals sensed his powerlessness, and began to snarl and circle. He cracked the whip repeatedly to keep them away. And then suddenly there was a pop, and the whip stopped vibrating. The animals were silent, watching. The audience ceased all movement.

He tossed the useless whip and prod aside, and lifted the gun high into the air with his tail. He transferred it to his hand and fired one shot. The crack echoed around the tent. The animals backed off a step. As he edged toward the door, he pulled the trigger again. The gun only clicked, again and again.

Damn McPeter! KaJamie broke for the door, but the animals were much quicker than he. His hair and face were gone in seconds — peeled off like the skin from a grape.

The crowd erupted, shrieking, crying, gasping, pointing. Some covered their eyes with their hands, but more stared greedily as the griffin padded around the cage with its limp, lifeless bundle. Each animal came forward to claim its share, ripping a piece of bloody pulp from the lump in the griffin's mouth. The crowd didn't settle down until long after the trainers had gotten all the animals back into their cages, and had shovelled the remaining shreds of KaJamie into a small green bag.

"This is a bad one, Doc." The roadie unceremoniously dumped the green bag onto the laboratory floor.

"Who?"

"The animal tamer."

"God, that must be a bad one. He's usually the worst. Are you sure you got the brain? The braincase unhurt?"

"Yeah, yeah. They couldn't hurt that titanium. It's in there. But that's about all that's there."

"That's okay, as long as you got the brain, as long as the memory is there. That's the important thing, to grow back the same man."

"Can I stay and watch?"

"Sure, sure." The doctor

opened the bag and dumped the contents out on the examining table. "Ugh. This is all useless. We'll have to do a total regeneration from the brain and remaining head cells. Too bad — it's going to take a while. May as well do it right now, though. He's gotta come back, sooner or later." The doctor sighed.

He took the head section, sterilized it, and went through the elaborate process of hooking it into the special tanks. He worked silently for over an hour. When he was finally through, he turned to the watching roadie. "The miracle of modern science. This job should take six, maybe seven hours. A few cells, a few jolts through the machines, and presto! Good as new. Maybe even better."

He looked critically at the apparatus, and adjusted a few dials. "Six or seven hours, plus two or three more for the face-changing operation. How was the house tonight?"

"Good. A sellout, and lively. They really went berserk over this."

The doctor nodded. "I wonder how they would react if they knew the secret of the circus." He laughed. "I don't suppose they would really care."

KaJamie sat on the edge of the examining table. The doctor was making some final checks before releasing him. "Now take it easy

for a while, son," the doctor said. "You've had a total regeneration, plus a lot of plastic surgery in here." He ran his hand along the new lines of KaJamie's face. "This new tissue is fragile."

KaJamie barely heard him. He felt tired and sluggish, and he had a terrible headache. His limbs felt like lead. But there was something else that bothered him more than any of this. He would soon have to face McPeter.

He left the laboratory and went to the office, where McPeter was waiting for him.

"All right, KaJamie, you found out. You found out what happens when you don't go along voluntarily. When it's your turn to get it, you get it, willingly or not. At least if you do it yourself you have some choice of when it happens."

KaJamie looked up at him miserably. "Let me out of this. Let me go. I won't tell the secret. No one will know how many times I've died! I can't take this! You have to let me go."

McPeter shook his head slowly. "You should have thought of that before you decided to join us. We've invested a lot in you — titanium isn't cheap, you know. And you came to us in the first place. You wanted to be in the circus. You wanted to perform. We told you the secret, and you came anyway. And God knows we pay you well enough."

"You can have your money. All

of it, if you want. I just want to go. Next stop."

McPeter's expression stiffened. "Come on. Don't be stupid. You know what happens to you if you run. We've had electrodes imbedded in the titanium. They were put there to kill you, if you ever tried to run out."

KaJamie stared up at McPeter, his eyes black with fury. "You're a monster," he said, but he knew it was useless. There was no way out. Tears formed at the corners of his eyes.

"Oh, come on now, look at the bright side!" McPeter patted him on the back. "You're performing, just like you wanted. Full houses! A different world every day! And you're good — hell, you're the best! The very best in the universe." The tears rolled down KaJamie's cheeks.

"Come on now, KaJamie, don't blame me. It's not my fault! If it were up to me, I would let you leave. But I've got backers to answer to. I have to go along with them. If I didn't do it, then someone else would.

"You're tired. Go to your compartment. You don't have to go on tonight. Sleep, you'll feel better later. Think about what you want your new name to be. And forget about leaving. There is really nothing you can do." McPeter sat down awkwardly behind his desk.

KaJamie exploded. He lunged across the desk, sinking his claws into McPeter's throat. After a few

seconds, McPeter slid from his grasp and fell in a heap on the floor. KaJamie walked out of the office. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered now, nothing would ever matter again.

Meena, the snake charmer, met him at the door and led him gently to his bunk. She knew how it felt. She had been the animal tamer before him.

McPeter's blood poured softly onto the strands of the carpet.

He shook his head, and rotated it tentatively. McPeter had a headache and a very stiff neck. But all in all, it wasn't that bad. He really didn't see what they had to complain about. He should know. He was in charge of two dozen performers.

"Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen," McPeter droned, "The Great Jordan will now dive fifty meters, blindfolded, into this tiny pool. Fifty meters, into less than one meter of water! If he is just a fraction off — just a fraction! — he will hit the edge, and be sliced in half. Look above your heads, Ladies and Gentlemen, fifty meters up to The Great Jordan!"

Jordan stepped into the spotlights on the diving platform. His blindfold had one way peepholes, reflective cloth patches he could see through, but still he could not bear to look down. Fifty meters was a long way to fall. And tonight was his turn.

Could one old woman
save an entire world?

Mrs. Millman Speaks

by Mike Baron

Mrs. Sylvia Millman, 70, was having lunch with her daughter Eleanor Teitlebaum in the Supreme Deli, in Coolidge Corner, Brookline, Massachusetts. Mrs. Millman had ordered the gefilte fish after some deliberation; her experience with the Supreme's gefilte fish had often ended in gas, but she liked the consistency and flavor.

Eleanor had ordered a corned beef sandwich. Mrs. Millman would have liked to order corned beef, but her teeth did not feel up to it that day. She ate her gefilte fish, bent low over the plate to prevent passing crows from stealing.

Eleanor said, "That gefilte fish is too rich for you. I shouldn't have let you have it."

"Mmff?" Mrs. Millman asked, surprised in mid-mouthful. Little tendrils of gefilte fish stuck to her lips, drool ran down her chin. She no longer noticed. Eleanor was disgusted.

"I said too much cholesterol!"

"You watch what you say about Lester Poole!"

Lester Poole had been Mrs. Millman's date on an outing in Fall River, in 1937.

"I said too much fat! You're eating *fatty foods* again!"

An obese young man at a nearby table looked guiltily about; he stole quietly, away leaving a portion of his cheesecake uneaten.

"Doctor Gold said you shouldn't be allowed more than one fatty meal a day. You've already had eggs today, and this gefilte fish is too much. It's so rich here, I don't know why I let you have it. Between the *shlepping* you have to do without waiters and standing at the counter, and the greasy silverware and the screaming babies, for this I give up my Fridays?"

"What?" Mrs. Millman demanded. But she knew what Eleanor was talking about even if she couldn't make out the words. Complaining and *kvetching* and whining about taking care of a senile, troublesome old woman. It

was always the same. Why couldn't Sylvia just lay low at the Home until she got her final call? In the meantime, they played out their parts. Sylvia tried to extract from Eleanor signs of fealty, mostly in the form of confirmed outings, time spent miserably together. Once a week she could pretty much count on. If she got two or more visits a week, that was very rare. But Eleanor could be counted upon to duck out once a month, claiming headache, important civic association meeting, or a cold, and promising to make up for it, but she never did, just slipped further behind. Nobody fooled nobody.

"Mother, this is really too much. Bad enough you walk around in a fog because you're too vain to wear your eyeglasses. I've made an appointment for you with a good ear doctor and he's going to fit you for a hearing aid."

Sylvia heard the words "hearing aid" distinctly. They were key words in her vocabulary, like "sorry," and "nap," and "I promise."

"Now don't you start with that hearing aid business again," she protested.

"There, you heard me perfectly that time, didn't you? If you hear me so clearly, why don't you answer me instead of going 'what? what?' all the time?"

"Don't you bother me with your hearing aid! Do you think I don't

know whether or not I need a hearing aid?" The problem, as she saw it, was not so much that she couldn't hear her daughter and son-in-law, but that they refused to listen to her.

"You need one. You're going to see the doctor this afternoon."

"I am not going this afternoon. I have canasta with Mrs. Marks and Mrs. Fabrini and after that I have my nap."

"Not this afternoon you don't. I'll be happy to call Mrs. Marks and apologize and set another date for you."

Sylvia fretted helplessly. There was nothing she could do. The growing fuzziness in her hearing over the years did not bother her much; it screened out the noise of the traffic outside the room she shared with Mrs. Aaronson at the Summit Hill Nursing Home, and when she really wanted to hear, television for instance, she could plug in the special ear plug and turn it up loud. Now this stupid business of the hearing aid. Why couldn't they leave her alone? Though her weekly excursions to Coolidge Corner, to the beauty parlor and the Supreme Deli were enjoyable, they would certainly be less so if she were forced to listen to her daughter, or her imbecilic son-in-law Harvey Teitlebaum, the no-good so-and-so.

The doctor's name was something like Higgins or Wiggins; he

certainly wasn't Jewish. He was young/old with healthy pink skin and a bald head, and smelled faintly of ham sandwich. But then, everyone seemed to smell of ham sandwich lately.

"Now then, I don't think this presents much of a problem. There, how does that sound?" he inquired, making a minute adjustment on the flesh-colored device which clung to Sylvia's right ear like a cancer. Like the one that got Mrs. Feldstein, God rest her.

"Eh?" The sound was fuzzy. She knew exactly what he'd said, but if she were to be affixed to this thing, this electronic intruder, she would have it working properly.

"Mother, can you hear me?" Eleanor asked, much too loud, an effortful smile on her face.

"Yes, yes! It's very loud now, but fuzzy."

"All right," said Dr. Higgins/Wiggins, "we just turn down the volume a bit like so..." He did so with a jeweler's screwdriver while the device was in her ear, making a tiny scratching noise like mice burrowing. They had had such aggravation getting the aid to sit properly in Sylvia's ear without pain that they could not bear the thought of Sylvia removing it in their presence.

"Ow!" she said, just to make them feel guilty.

"Sorry, this will only take a second." He turned the tone control deftly with his screwdriver,

wishing it were two pounds heavier and a foot longer. "There, that didn't hurt, did it?"

"You would know if it hurt? It hurts! Like a big lump in my ear!"

"Well, you'll get used to that in a few days. Remember, you should only wear it about two hours at a stretch to start."

"Don't worry!"

"After that, you'll get used to it. You'll be able to leave it in all day."

"It makes funny sounds!"

"Mother, that's just the sound of everyday life. You haven't heard it in so long you're not used to it."

"Funny sounds, I tell you, like mice and beeping!"

Dr. Higgins/Wiggins glanced at Eleanor with a slight shrug. What-areyougonnado?

From the doctor's they proceeded to Eleanor's house where Sylvia would join the family for Friday night Shabbus dinner.

Four o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and the son-in-law, Harvey, was sitting on the sofa having a beer and watching *The Munsters*. If he had listened to Sylvia's advice when he and Eleanor had married, he'd be a kingpin in furniture today. A kingpin! Like what's his name, Grossman, with four huge discount stores and a mansion in Weston.

"Hello, Mother!" he said too eagerly. He got up from the couch, beer in hand, and bussed her on

the cheek. "Got off work a little early today..." If he hadn't been fired. "You're looking great."

"Hello, Harvey." She kissed him back. "Where's David?" David, her only grandchild, because Harvey couldn't afford more than one child. He couldn't really afford David.

"Dave!?" Harvey bellowed like a fishseller in Haymarket Square.

"Whattayawant?" a voice shrilled back from the second floor of their home, their modest home, their *too* modest home, thank you. They had made it abundantly clear some years ago that the home was really too small for Sylvia to live with them comfortably.

"Grandma is here," Eleanor shouted back, trying to ignite a little enthusiasm.

"Coming." David bounded down the stairs, a knobby, skinny fourteen-year-old. Why didn't they feed him properly? His eyes, sunken into his head like a victim in a concentration camp. Couldn't they manage to feed their own child properly?

"Look — look at him, how skinny he looks! Like he's starving!"

"Mother, he's a perfectly normal growing boy. He's on the track team at his school and he eats plenty, believe me."

Sylvia held him close, feeling for the ribs. There they were. Like a victim in a concentration camp. "Look — his ribs, how they're

standing, like a standing rib roast. I should send over some food, or if you'd let me fix dinner..."

"Dinner's all fixed for tonight, Mother. You don't want to go to all that trouble, really, do you?"

"Not so loud," Sylvia said, putting a hand to the plastic lump in her ear. It had been quite unnoticeable beneath her elaborately coiffed gray hair. "You don't have to shout."

Eleanor rearranged her features into what she hoped was a smile. "Mother got a new hearing aid today. She's able to hear us all clearly, so there's no need to shout. Isn't that right, Mother?"

"It hisses. Ssssss!" she said, shaking her head just in front of Eleanor's face, making her daughter step back; Sylvia turned quickly to wink at David. David grinned, then looked at her ear with interest. He was fascinated by all electronic gadgets and had a large collection of old transistor radios with which he was constantly fiddling.

"Grandma, can I see your hearing aid?"

"Oh, you don't want to take it out, do you, Mother?"

"It makes funny noises."

"Maybe I can fix it."

"You don't want to take it out just yet, you should try and get used to it."

"It's hurting. I think I'll take it out for awhile." At least she wouldn't be forced to converse

with her *shlepper* son-in-law who had stood mute, beer in hand, vaguely aware of some propriety which required him to stand until his mother-in-law was seated or had left the room. His head had swiveled back towards the color television set. Sylvia reached up, pulled the plastic apparatus from her ear, and handed it to David. A wire trailed from the pink plastic glob to a little battery pack on her blouse. Fumbling for this, she handed it over. Already the hearing aid had stopped hurting, but she had been constantly aware of the noises it made.

Eleanor said to Harvey, "It's just the noise of everyday life, that's all. There's absolutely nothing wrong with the goddamn hearing aid. It cost one hundred and twelve dollars, not to mention the fitting — she's so unused to hearing the sound of normal, everyday life, she doesn't know what it is."

Harvey, staring at the television, said, "So let her take it out if she wants. That'll keep her happy. I'm gonna watch my program."

"Oh God, I hope we don't have to go through a scene over the hearing aid like we did with the glasses. I'm not shelling out another two hundred dollars so she can ignore the damn thing."

"You're not shelling out," Harvey corrected. "I'm shelling out."

Laboriously, Sylvia climbed the

carpeted steps, like a mountain somewhere. David sat hunched over his workbench in his room with the hearing aid already separated into several minute parts. So intent he was! Like a young Einstein, bent over the tiny electronic parts with his pliers and his screwdriver, and a tiny voltage meter. He took a sip of Coke, spilled Coke on the bench, picked up the hearing aid, shook it, resumed work.

"Look at you," she exclaimed. "Like a young Einstein!"

He grinned. He didn't mind that she dribbled when she ate. Some of his best friends dribbled when they ate. He respected her knowledge of Middle East Politics gleaned from subscriptions to *The Jerusalem Post* and *Manchester Weekly*. Someday she would take him to visit Israel.

"Here, Grandma." He proffered the device. "That should fix it. I just double-checked all the connections, cleaned it up a little. Should get rid of interference."

"What?" she said automatically, as she screwed it back in.

"How does it sound?"

"Ooh! Too loud!" She reached for the little control on her battery pack, turned it down. "There, that's much better."

"How does it sound now? Any better?"

"That's much better, David. Much clearer. Such a little genius!" She kissed him.

"Look at this, Grandma." He broke deftly away and led her over to his desk. "My ham radio outfit."

"Ham?" she asked sharply.

"It's okay. It's kosher. That's just a slang term for this radio rig. With it, I can hear all over the world. Last night I spoke with a radio operator in Korea."

"They're all communists over there."

He laughed. "See?" He gestured at a bulletin board covered with post cards from all over the world. "We exchange call letters. I've got cards from Peru, Borneo, Canada, Mexico. Everyplace but outer space."

"Such a little explorer you are, such a Marconi!"

"Mother! David!" Eleanor called from the bottom of the steps. "We're going to be lighting the candles soon."

They went downstairs, David preceding and helping his grandmother. Gathered around the little dining room table covered with a fine lace cloth which Sylvia had inherited from her mother, Eleanor lit the candles and said the Shabbus prayer quickly, then moved directly to the food. While they were eating they didn't have to talk so much.

Midway through the brisket the strange noises started again.

"There they go," Sylvia said.

"What is it, Mother?" Eleanor said to her plate, afraid of looking

up, afraid of seeing the rivulets of gravy running down the creases in Sylvia's jowls.

"My hearing aid — it's making funny noises."

"Well, why don't you just shut it off for awhile?" Eleanor looked at her accusingly.

Sylvia fumbled for the switch, turned it down. The noises became very faint: the clanking of the silverware, the disgusting smooching sound that Harvey made, the strange beeping.

Faintly, as if in the distance, she heard Eleanor say, "It's just the noise of everyday life. She hasn't heard it in so long she doesn't know what it is."

The noises continued, but the hearing aid was undeniably helpful, so Sylvia just learned to ignore them. At first the high-pitched whining had been obtrusive, but as she learned to ignore it, it fell in pitch and became almost pleasant, a barely audible humming as if from vast turbines hidden deep in the bowels of the earth. It reminded her of the warm security she had felt huddled in a bunk with her mother on the sea passage over from Russia. Her mother, God rest her, had sold her jewelry to earn them passage, but they had had a stateroom to themselves, with her two brothers. Late at night, in that bunk in their stateroom, she lay still feeling the mighty vibrations of the engines far below, carrying

them all to a brighter land.

So she really didn't mind the noises that much. She stopped talking about them. They still changed from time to time, from a deep humming to a sort of chiming sound. And once it seemed to her almost like she was hearing human voices conversing in a room through a thick wall. Sylvia knew of a gentleman, Mr. Silverman, a former watchmaker, who had been able to pick up radio broadcasts on his bridgework. The irony of it had been that Mr. Silverman had been subjected almost continuously to a barrage of hellfire and brimstone Baptist preaching. Him, an Orthodox gentleman. Finally he had had the beautiful bridgework taken out. What became of him after that she did not know.

Nearly a month after the acquisition of the hearing aid Sylvia and Eleanor were sitting in a small seafood restaurant in Coolidge Corner. They could no longer tolerate the impersonality of the Supreme Deli, too much like the Welfare Building to suit either of them.

"Well, Mother, what would you like?" Eleanor asked.

"Scallops," Sylvia said.

"Mother, you know what the doctor said. That's much too rich for you today. What about this nice mackerel? You like mackerel."

"No I don't."

"Well, what *do* you want?" Eleanor demanded. It was really too early in the afternoon for her to develop a headache. "How about the seafood platter? Or maybe just a nice big bowl of chowder?"

Sylvia decided. She would have the scallops with the cole slaw.

The waiter appeared, and Eleanor rattled off her order. "I'll have the fried clam plate, with the baked potato, and a glass of iced coffee. And my mother would like a large bowl of the seafood chowder, and a tossed salad."

"No, no," Sylvia protested. "I want the scallops."

Eleanor said, "I'm sorry, Mother. Scallops are really too rich for you. Why don't you have the chowder instead?"

Seized by anger, Sylvia couldn't even talk. She could only think, "I want the scallops! Scallops! Why don't you listen to me? I'm not just a senile old woman! I'm somebody! Me, Mrs. Sylvia Millman!"

The noise inside her hearing aid said, "Mrs. Sylvia Millman."

"What?" she replied, startled.

"She'll have the chowder, and a nice glass of milk," Eleanor concluded.

"Mrs. Sylvia Millman," the voice said again in a flat, vaguely metallic tone. She could tell it was coming from the hearing aid, from the same place as the buzzes and the beeps and the chimes.

"Who is it?" She looked around

reflexively.

"Mother," Eleanor began, leaning forward, keeping her voice down lest she attract attention from neighboring tables. "To whom are you speaking?"

"A strange voice inside my hearing aid."

Eleanor clucked, fumbled for a cigarette. She had tried to quit recently. But really, if Mother was going to insist on strange voices in the hearing aid, which had already cost \$212 with more to come, then she was entitled to smoke.

Sylvia said nothing else about the strange voice.

A few days later, the voice reappeared. Sylvia was lying on her bed, watching *The Waltons* on her color television set with her ear-plug in. Mrs. Aaronson was lying on her bed watching *The Waltons* on her black and white television. Sylvia had become convinced, recently, that Mrs. Aaronson was using her color television without her permission while she was out of the room, and was stealing from her large tin of imported butter cookies, the gift of her grandson on Valentine's Day. She knew they were missing — she had counted.

So there had been a strict, unspoken apportioning of rights and privileges. Mrs. Aaronson was not to help herself so freely to Mrs. Millman's cookies, television, and kleenex. Mrs. Aaronson responded by placing her FM clock/radio off-limits. They no longer spoke

except to require the other to move some object out of her rightful and allotted half of the room.

With Waltons blaring into her left ear, and her hearing aid which she had forgotten to remove amplifying further Waltons from Mrs. Aaronson's set blaring into her right ear, she sat, glasses on, not caring how she looked to Mrs. Aaronson, awash in Waltons.

Her right ear spoke up in the flat metallic accent, but much closer than before. "Mrs. Sylvia Millman, hear us!"

"What?" She looked around, stared over at Mrs. Aaronson, who was also hard of hearing, and disposed to ignore Sylvia even on the best of days. "Did you say something?"

Mrs. Aaronson looked at her. "What did you say?" she asked.

"Were you talking to me?"

"No, I was not." Mrs. Aaronson turned resolutely back to her Waltons. Black and white though they were, they were her own.

"Mrs. Sylvia Millman," the voice continued, "forgive our intrusion into your privacy. You are the first being with whom we have been able to make contact. We have been trying, by every means known to our people, to make some breakthrough to the people of earth. That is, your earth. We are speaking from an adjacent chronos continuum. The situation here is desperate; we must speak with your authorities

as soon as possible. Our continuum, which we also call 'Earth,' is facing a crisis of monumental proportions. Do you understand this, Mrs. Sylvia Millman?"

"Through my hearing aid you want to talk?"

Mrs. Aaronson shot her a baleful glance. She was quite used to Sylvia's occasional outbursts, but they were seldom of such duration.

The voice said, "First, please tell us, are we using your correct title, Mrs. Sylvia Millman? We wish to be absolutely correct in matters of protocol."

This would never do. She would never be able to comprehend what the voice was saying between the Waltons on one hand, and Mrs. Aaronson's hostile interruptions on the other.

"Wait," she said. "Wait, I'm going. I'll go out into the park, then we can talk." She had seldom gone to the park near the Home, the park overlooking the Charles River basin, Cambridge, and points north. It was a gathering spot for wild dogs and young hoodlums who sat long into the night drinking beer and causing trouble. So all right, she would take the chance. The situation was desperate, according to the voice.

She put on her beige sweater, hand-knit, and her plain cloth coat. In case she were attacked in the park, they shouldn't get her nice fur.

She had to cross Summit Avenue

in order to reach the park. She peered both ways fuzzily, having forgotten her glasses. She stepped out into the road. Before she was halfway across, the noise of an engine intruded and began to increase in pitch. Confused as to which direction it was coming from, she continued walking.

An orange sports car roared toward her, lurched aside at the last moment, horn blaring, and accelerated away. As it passed she glimpsed a large red face, like a corned beef left to boil too long, leering at her from the driver's seat. There were such creatures who took special pleasure in harassing elderly women, whom they assumed to be helpless. She straightened her back and walked purposefully toward the curb opposite. She had business to attend to.

In the park, stepping carefully around the piles of dog do, she found a bench with most of the slats still intact, and sat down facing the magnificent, invisible vista to the north.

"All right, so talk already. This is Mrs. Sylvia Millman — I'm listening." Such *tsuris* the voice was causing!

The voice began talking about his people. They were from a place very close by, but unreachable by normal spatial channels. Sylvia thought immediately of Beverly where a brother-in-law had once lived, but the voice assured her

that they were even more difficult to reach than that; they were in some sort of parallel universe. They had been trying, by every means at their disposal, to establish communications with someone, something, anything outside the narrow confines of their physical universe. They had been trying for sixty-five years. Indeed, attempted communication with another intelligent species had become the main industry of their most powerful country. They had tried space travel, but their progress had been too meager to be fruitful. They'd used the electromagnetic spectrum at every frequency to broadcast their message: "We are here! Answer us! Let us know you're out there!" Most of the people over there didn't believe there *was* anyone out there, and objected to the "waste" of precious resources involved in the "futile" attempts.

"What, exactly, is the problem?" Mrs. Sylvia Millman asked. "Why such a fuss?"

"Mrs. Millman," the voice explained, "from our limited understanding of your world we gather that you have such things as religion, politics, goals deemed worthy..."

"Indeed we do." At least this disembodied voice was no crank call, not if he was concerned with such dignified matters.

"Yes, and that one way or another, it is these beliefs which help

to hold your society together. So long as people can believe in a life after death, or a better tomorrow, or even a tax break, they're willing to go along, to live together in a degree of harmony. We, too, have our religions. However, imagine if you will a nation of telepaths. For that's what we are, telepaths. We can read each other's minds — it has been our blessing and our curse. This is our birthright, our natural ability. But it's an ability we cannot control — it's like hearing. If the thoughts of another person are near enough or intense enough, we hear. There is no way to shut it off. We therefore have no secrets from one another.

"In the beginning, when our race was young, the problem went unnoticed because there was room for all — room to avoid the babel. But our world is no longer as large as it once was. It is becoming increasingly difficult for us to avoid each other's thoughts. Even when we sleep, the dreams of others intrude, disrupting our rest with alien imagery, the burdens and fears of our neighbors."

Mrs. Millman felt slightly embarrassed at these revelations, for she had been properly brought up, and, unlike Mrs. Aaronson, took no special pleasure in hearing of the misfortunes of others. Yet the voice had something to say that went beyond mere *kvetching*. Plainly, the voice was deeply troubled. "It must be terrible," she en-

couraged him.

"It is terrible. But let me elaborate. We, too, have our religion; it's more homogenous than the situation on your world. For centuries, our religion preached of lands and cities and peoples far away from our earth, where the dead were reborn without the telepathic ability. Our religion is not quite universal — it has its splinter groups. Many believe that when we die, the worthy are reborn in this other place — perhaps it is your earth — and that we live and die again free of the burden of collective guilts and anxieties of our neighbors. Another branch of our religion holds that there is no after-life, but that this place without telepathy still exists, and that it is possible for us to go there someday and walk among men with our minds in blissful solitude. Just believing that such a place exists was enough for most of us, for awhile. And you do exist."

"Yes, yes we do. It must be very nice for you, to find out this is true."

"It is heaven," the voice quietly agreed. "But even heaven may not be enough. It may be too late for us."

"But you've found us," Mrs. Millman said. "We do exist."

"Yes," said the voice, "but I'm not sure you can help. Our psyches are battered and beaten. A bitter depression clouds our minds. People don't believe there's any-

thing to live for, and, Mrs. Millman, that belief may be stronger than the fact of your existence. It's so difficult to explain to a non-telepath. You have no idea of our problems! The economy is floundering, there are food riots, crime is out of control. Anxieties feed upon themselves like a fire-storm, creating more trouble, more breakdowns. A great crisis in faith is breaking our spirit."

"I understand," Sylvia commiserated to the chill March air.

"Mrs. Sylvia Millman, people here have nothing in which they can believe beyond their own daily needs. Despair is highly contagious, particularly in a society of telepaths. But hope keeps us alive, those of us who believe there is something more. And now we know — we are not alone! We don't know exactly where you are, but you are the first being we have contacted outside of this planet. Our most powerful telepaths, our mightiest machines are bent to the all-important task of keeping alive this line of communication which we have established. Our knowledge of your language, of your world, we've absorbed through your thoughts."

"Oh my," she exclaimed sharply. Such thoughts she had had! Mrs. Aaronson choking to death on a stolen butter cookie.

"Please, forgive us for this intrusion into your privacy. We know it's inexcusable, but I assure

you that your thoughts remain private, known only to a group of highly qualified government advisers."

"Doctors?" That was all right then, for doctors to know.

"Yes. We are interested in establishing contact with your government. As valuable as you are to us, for you are the first, a single extra-terrestrial contact by itself won't be enough to reverse the inertia present in our society. These people need to know that their lives do not represent a sort of local anomaly, unique in space and time. If I could only convey to you the urgency of the problem! We've had wars over this thing; a breakdown in communications and commerce; people are starving again. Disease is on the rise — all because of this damned ennui which has taken us in a death grip! Please excuse my language."

"You're entitled, I suppose."

"Mrs. Sylvia Millman, can you contact your authorities? Can you make your president listen, apply your scientists to the task of widening this narrow gateway between our worlds? Right now, you are our only chance. In sixty-five years of continuous reaching, we have only touched your hand."

So poetic, the voice was. Like Spinoza. Or what's his name, the Arab poet who grew up in Boston, Gibran.

Flattered, she replied, "Well, I'll certainly see what I can do.

Give me time to think." It had been so long since anyone had asked her opinion on anything, except for Mrs. Aaronson, who only wanted to disagree, anyway.

A group of cadaverous youngsters practicing cigarette dangling looked at the old woman talking to herself on the park bench.

"Do what you can. We are standing by twenty-four hours a day. We are in contact with what you experience, but we will assume now a passive role so as not to interfere with your thoughts. We know this is going to be difficult, so we'll keep quiet. But please hurry."

"All right, all right. I'll do what I can. It's not so easy getting around, you know."

First, she thought about going back to Higgins/Wiggins and showing him the hearing aid. But him, with his ham sandwich smell and his oodles of hearing devices, he'd never hear a thing. If she stood on his belly and shouted in his face he'd hear nothing. So where did that leave her? Eleanor?

"Just the noises of everyday life, that's all it is."

Harvey, her industrious son-in-law? It was too funny for words.

But David, that brilliant youngster as yet untouched by his father's lethargy, his mother's cynicism, David would listen. Sylvia looked at her expensive silver and diamond wristwatch, always on because it was too much

trouble to take off. It was late; almost nine-thirty. She was supposed to be back in her room now, with Mrs. Aaronson, either watching *Police Woman* or playing cards or sleeping. The nurse, what's her name, would stick her big nose in the room and check.

So let her check! She was a grown woman! Now, how to get over to David's house? Her daughter's family only lived a half mile away. But it was a treacherous half mile, very steep, and marked at intersections by vicious dogs and speeding, impersonal autos.

In her sturdy blue pumps, Sylvia laboriously got to her feet and set off down the hill. The youngsters dangled cigarettes and watched her go.

Twice she was nearly run over, and once she slipped and had to be helped to her feet by a young woman, who grimaced with distaste. It took her over an hour to walk the distance, but at last she lurched up the shabby, peeling wooden steps and rang the bell. Harvey was such a *schlemiel*, he couldn't afford to have the house properly painted. Soon the neighbors would complain about this eyesore in the midst of their nice neatness.

David came to the door. "Grandma! What are you doing here?"

"Not so loud! Let me in."

"Mom and Dad are playing bridge with some friends," he ex-

plained, leading her into the foyer, helping her off with her coat. "Do you want a cup of tea?"

"Not now. There's no time to waste, David. We have to get in touch with the President."

"Huh?"

"Listen, I'm not kidding. Listen to this!" She pulled out her hearing aid, stopped, put it back in. "So this is Mrs. Sylvia Millman speaking, can you hear me?"

"Yes, we're standing by," the voice replied.

"I'm handing you over to my grandson, David Teitlebaum. He's a very nice boy. I want you to tell him about your problem." She handed the hearing aid to David.

He stuck it in his ear. A blank expression remained on his face while he fiddled with the dials. He shook it. "Just the usual noise, Grandma." He handed it back.

"So it's on my shoulders." She was impressed by her stoicism. "I'm the only one who can hear them. I'll have to tell you their problems myself." She outlined to him what had been told her in the park.

"Now it's very important that you listen to me, and not just think I'm crazy."

"Really?" he said dubiously. He wanted to be convinced; he believed passionately in flying saucers himself. But he'd often heard his parents comment on his grandmother's mental health.

"I'm not just a senile old

woman, I tell you!" she said with mature conviction. "Those voices are in there, I tell you! Listen — listen to the problems! Such problems, I'm telling you — war, unemployment, disease, crime..."

"Wow, Grandma. Sounds just like our world."

"No, no, it's not, I tell you!"

"So what should we do?"

"Let's write a letter to the President. I'll dictate, you can type. You hear me back there, wherever you are?" she asked the hearing aid. "You tell me what to write, we'll write it."

"Mrs. Sylvia Millman," the voice replied, "We appreciate your efforts on our behalf. But from what we know of your world, and of government in general, we doubt if a letter will prove effective. Do you have any more immediate means?"

"We could telephone."

So they telephoned the President. Sylvia thought it was very late, but it was an emergency. They got a polite secretary who listened calmly to their claims without chuckling, and promised that the President would look into the matter at his earliest convenience.

Then Eleanor and Harvey came home. Harvey was drunk and Eleanor was tipsy. As they came in the front door, with a noise like a bull elephant breaking loose from its stockade, Eleanor said, "But no, you've got to 'put a little money on it.' You've got to open

your goddamn yap and plop down the entire week's grocery money!"

"We should have won that rubber!"

"You couldn't win a rubber if you had five dimes and a prophylactic machine!"

Sylvia appeared at the top of the stairs. "Please, not so loud! What kind of language is this for you to be talking?"

"Mother!" She was too shocked to show displeasure. "What are you doing here?"

To tell them about the troubles on the other side of the hearing aid — that crazy she was not. That crazy she didn't need. Open her mouth about that, they'd have her committed to some place where they'd never have to come and visit, or *shlep* her to the beauty parlor, or to lunch at some nice deli.

"Just thought I'd take a walk, that's all. Just thought I'd take a walk."

"It's awfully late, Mother. Would you like to spend the night on the sofa? I could make it up." Eleanor looked at the sofa, suffered from a vision of seeing her mother there in the morning. "Or Harvey could drive you home. He's still got his coat on. Come on. Harvey will drive you home."

Harvey glared about sullenly. He didn't fancy another little chore, but it would get him out of Eleanor's line of fire for a few minutes.

"Yeah, come on, Mother. I'll give you a lift. Come on down and let's go."

"Wait a minute! Let me kiss my grandson goodbye!" She went back into David's room. "Not a word to your parents, now!"

"Nope, not a word. And the next time you come over, we'll try to reach somebody with my ham radio outfit. Barry Goldwater maybe."

"Ach!" she exclaimed in disgust. "He's ashamed to call himself a Jew!"

"We'll be able to convince somebody, you'll see."

Such a darling boy. "I know we will, David." She patted him on the cheek and went slowly down the stairs to where Harvey waited, as if for a shot of penicillin.

Later, alone in her room except for Mrs. Aaronson, who didn't count, she lay awake thinking. Mrs. Aaronson's breathing sounded like the breeze rustling dead leaves.

At last, very quietly, she said, "Are you there? This is Mrs. Sylvia Millman speaking."

"We're standing by, Mrs. Millman."

"Listen — I didn't have such good luck today. I wasn't able to reach the President. But I did convince my grandson, and tomorrow we'll try to spread your message with his radio outfit. He can talk all over the world."

"I see."

"He's got postcards from China, Borneo, all over the world he can talk with that thing."

"Mrs. Millman, we appreciate your efforts on our behalf. But frankly, it looks grim. For the present."

She gasped. "You're not hanging up, are you?"

"Certainly not. We do, however, need some time to evaluate this information you've given us. But don't concern yourself about your importance in this matter, Mrs. Millman. You are our official representative on your planet. I would go so far as to say that you are the single most important person to the future of our world." There was some faint muttering behind the voice. "Will you excuse us for a few minutes?" the voice asked.

Mrs. Millman felt tired. "You know, you are a very nice-sounding young man, but this has been a busy day for me."

"Of course! How inconsiderate of us."

"I'm going to take my hearing aid out now and go to sleep. You shouldn't worry — I'll put it right back in in the morning and we'll talk some more."

"Certainly, Mrs. Millman. We'll be standing by."

In the morning, following a visit to the bathroom unnecessarily prolonged by Mrs. Aaronson's denture ritual, a hasty breakfast of soft-boiled eggs and toast, Mrs.

Millman skipped her regular morning canasta game and made her way once again to the park. She sat down on a bench overlooking the curve of the Charles River and the myriad structures that were Cambridge, and inserted her earplug. Like a secret agent, she felt.

"Mrs. Millman, we've been working since last we spoke," the voice announced. "We have a program."

"So tell me — what can I do?"

"It's a slim chance, but a workable one. We detect subtle differences in physics between our earth and your earth — not only in physics, but in mathematics, principles of fine arts, and philosophy. What we intend is to tell you things of such a different and original perspective that the experts in these fields won't be able to ignore us. We will speak the special language of bankers, of musicians, of linguists. We will give you ideas that will let you shake others and command attention. The main difficulty, as we see it, is in gaining a forum for the presentation of our program. We will have to rely on you. We will have to dictate whole passages, which will probably make no sense to you, and you will speak them for us."

Mrs. Millman breathed in deeply, for courage. "I want you to know that I'm a good Jew, and I won't be used as a mouthpiece for any religious or political propaganda."

"Of course not! Nothing could be further from our minds!" The voice sounded near panic, terrified of losing her. "Only ideas to command attention to our plight! An enriching experience — we'll explain them all to you beforehand if you like."

"Never mind — I just wanted to make that clear. And I never was very good with arithmetic."

"Neither was I," said the voice. "I assure you, it will be no problem. Now, we have decided to make use of your grandson's ham radio system. If you can broadcast our messages on a regular basis, we're certain it's only a matter of time before you attract sufficient attention to effect a more permanent bond between our earths. We understand many important people listen to these radios on your earth, as a hobby. You will work the radio, and we will tell you what to say. Are you amenable to that?"

"Listen, I'll do whatever I can, but I'm afraid it won't be much. You need some kind of fancy operator's license to use that thing — if I were to talk on it without the license I could get in trouble."

"Well, we certainly have no intention of suborning our earthside representative. Is it possible for you to procure this radio license? Naturally, once we establish broader communications, we will recompense you for any expense..."

"Well I suppose so. David could help me. He's a very smart boy."

"Do you suppose you could begin on this immediately, Mrs. Millman? Considering the urgency of our situation..."

She threw her hands in the air. What could she do? If their civilization was falling apart she had to help. "All right, all right already! Such a *kverch!* So I'm heading directly over to David's house, even before lunch. I'll get on it today. Right away!"

"You're our only hope, Mrs. Millman."

"So tell me something, Mr. Doom and Gloom. You have a name?"

"Of course. I should have introduced myself sooner. Principal Chairman Garret Krovek at your service."

It sounded vaguely Czechoslovakian. "Well, never mind. That's too complicated for an old lady to remember. Would you mind if I called you Gary?"

"I would be honored."

That evening, Mrs. Millman began to study for her third class radio operator's license. David told his parents that Grandma was helping him with his history lessons. They were vaguely concerned about her sudden interest in David's schoolwork after years of only the most general and benign inquiries. She showed up four nights in a row. What could account for such an extreme and sudden change in her behavior?

Her purposefulness belied senility.

The Teitlebaums were frightened by the old woman's sudden vitality — it was as if she were gradually being replaced by someone they didn't know, someone more lively, more interesting than they themselves were. Sylvia even volunteered to walk herself home at the end of the evening, an act so stunning in its break with tradition and common sense that Harvey and Eleanor came to regard her with something close to awe. In a week she had sharpened visibly, her color and appetite had improved, and she could eat gefilte fish without gas or cramps. Eleanor Teitlebaum attributed these changes to her mother's sudden acquisition of a hearing aid following years of spiteful intransigence. She felt a daughter's pride and freshly kindled love in her achievement. Moreover, in the presence of the remarkable old lady's enthusiasm, the Teitlebaums were forced to mute their bickering, giving relief to all concerned, including their neighbors.

Before long, the Federal Communications Commission issued a third class radio operator's license to Mrs. Sylvia Millman, of Brookline, Massachusetts. Shortly after that she went on the air. People could not begin to guess from where she derived her theories and ideas — but she was preparing to tell them, and when she did, at least they would be listening.

Writing

Harlan Ellison



"Telltale Tics and Tremors"

Under the pseudonym "Frederick R. Ewing," the multifarious Theodore Sturgeon once wrote a serio-comic historical romp titled *I, LIBERTINE*, the protagonist of which had an interesting character trait. The novel was a swash-buckler, and the hero was a much-vaunted swordsman. The only trouble with him was that when he was in a dangerous situation, he became petrified with fear. When that happened, his mouth went dry and his upper lip invariably stuck to his teeth, forcing him to draw his mouth up to loosen it. It was a nervous tic, but the effect it had was to make him appear to be smiling. He became famous, therefore, as a man who "smiles in the face of danger." This minor infirmity was taken for what it was not, he was counted fearless, and frequently escaped being killed because it generated a wholly undeserved reputation for his being foolhardily dangerous to the point of lunacy; and it terrified the bejeezus out of his attackers.

Scott Fitzgerald foreshadowed the totality of the basic theme of *THE GREAT GATSBY* in his portrayals of Tom and Daisy

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Buchanan as people who "...smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their vast carelessness ... and let other people clean up the mess they had made..." The concept of "careless people" is one that applies perfectly to whole groups of young people one meets today. For instance, the wife of a friend of mine has managed to accumulate one hundred and thirteen parking tickets in a year in Beverly Hills alone. Most of them have even gone to warrant. Unlike New York City, where, if you are a scofflaw and have a pile of tickets, they settle with you once a year ... or states where they refuse to renew your license until you clean up your outstanding tickets ... in California they simply bust you and toss you in the cooler till you're paid up. So last week, when this woman's husband was stopped for some minor traffic infraction, the bacon ran the registration on the car through the computer, found out there were warrants outstanding, and tossed *him* in the clink till the hundreds of dollars were shelled out. He spent the night in the Beverly Hills slam and the next day they started to ship him off to one jail after another in the jurisdictions where *she* had picked up bad paper. Her carelessness caused an entire cadre of us, their friends, to waste a day and many dollars trying to pry *him* loose from the coils of the Law.

And she just laughed it off. Careless. And that's the key to her character. She is a woman terrified of growing up, of becoming an adult who must accept responsibility not only for her own life, but for that part of the lives of others that is involved with hers.

Pinocchio's nose grows when he tells a lie.

archy the cockroach avers he is the reincarnation of a *vers libre* poet.

Uriah Heep wrings his hands, dissembles, and deprecates himself when he is being disingenuous.

Scarlett O'Hara captures her character in microcosm, in a phrase, when she says, "I'll think about that tomorrow."

Chaucer's pilgrims all have mannerisms and physical attributes that speak to their basic nature. The Wife of Bath, as an example, is gap-toothed, meaning lusty. She had five husbands.

In the series of novels about the actor-thief Grofield, Donald Westlake (writing under the name Richard Stark) has his bemusingly melodramatic hero hearing film background music as he has his adventures. He'll be going into a dangerous caper and the soundtrack in his brain is playing, say, the theme from the Errol Flynn film, *The Sea Hawk*. It is a mild way of showing how Grofield is able to laugh at himself, even at a precarious moment, and it explicates his character fully.

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Thank you for your overwhelming response to our first catalog--we're still digging out of the order pile. Anyone who has suffered an order delay--our apologies. We'll be caught up by August 1st. This issue, we offer the best of the latest paperbacks (from a list from the Galileo column ALEPH, by Drew Whyte.) Out of respect for your copy, we have NOT included a coupon--Orders under \$10, please add \$1 for handling; Orders over \$20, take a 10% discount.

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Grofield's interior soundtrack, Uriah's dry-washing, Pinocchio's priapean proboscis, the Buchanans' (and my friend's wife's) amoral thoughtlessness, the swordsman's daunting grin . . . they are all examples of a writing skill that *must* be present in the work of anyone who wishes to create characters that live. They are the minute mannerisms and attributes that create an instant flare of recognition in the reader. They are the core of character delineation; and writers who think they can deal only with gimmicks and sociology and gadgets and concepts, without breathing life into the players on whom gimmicks, sociology, gadgets and concepts have their effect, is doomed to frustration . . . and worse, shallowness.

I've quoted this before, and will no doubt quote it many times more, but for me the most basic thing ever said about the important material for stories was said by William Faulkner in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. He said: "...the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat."

What I've just said is so obvious to any professional, that it must seem a ludicrous redundancy. Yet my experience with young writers has shown me that an astonishing number of talented people con-

ceive of the writing of a story as an exercise in conundrum: a problem situation that, like a locked-room mystery, must be solved. They relate to the work the way computer programmers relate to an "heuristic situation."

They simply do not comprehend, as each of you reading this *must* comprehend, on almost a cellular level, so it becomes basic nature with every story you attempt, that the only thing worth writing about is people. I'll say that again. The *only* thing worth writing about is people. *People*. Human beings. Men and women whose individuality must be created, line by line, insight by insight. If you do not do it, the story is a failure. It may be the most innovative scientific idea ever promulgated, but it will be a failure. I cannot stress this enough. There is no nobler chore in the universe than holding up the mirror of reality and turning it slightly, so we have a new and different perception of the commonplace, the everyday, the "normal," the obvious. *People* are reflected in the glass. The fantasy situation into which you thrust them is the mirror itself. And what we are shown should illuminate and alter our perception of the world around us. Failing that, you have failed totally.

Melville put it this way: "No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though

many there be who have tried it."

I had not meant, in this column, to get too deeply into the philosophy of writing. I leave that to pedants and academics who all-too-often worry such concepts into raggedness, like a puppy shaking a Pooh cuddly. Nonetheless, I am pressed to it; there is such a fractionalizing of the genre currently, with many writers opting for obscurantism and convoluted, insipid cleverness in aid of the smallest, most familiar point ... or wallowing in smug arrogance that they write "heroic" fiction that masters mind-numbing concepts, but do not reveal the presence of a single living, identifiable human being ... that I find I must belabor the *people* concept a moment longer.

One of the least defensible rationales for the "validity" of science fiction as a worthy genre of literature, handed down to us from the 1920's, is that it is a "problem-solving fiction." This bogus apologia, handservant to the more exploitable (but no less phony) asseverative justification that sf predicts the future, is a bit of paranoia left over from the period when the writing and the reading of sf was considered tantamount to being certifiably tetchy.

But those days are far behind us. The sophistication and craft-upgrading that has come to sf through the works of writers such as Silverberg, Disch, Wilhelm,

Wolfe, Harrison, Moorcock, Tip-tree and Le Guin has put it forever out of the line of contempt of all but the most purblind and reactionary critics. (This does not save us, however from the moronic effusions of *Time's* Peter Prescott or the lamebrains who work on rural dailies, who think they're being hip when they call it "sci-fi." Nor does it filter any light into the murky caverns wherein dwell hold-overs from the "Golden Era" who are now counted as great historians and critics of the field, who continue to suck up to every pitiful monster flick or limp-logic deigning of notice from Establishment journals, chiefly because their lack of ego-strength refuses to permit them to understand that sf has long-since arrived. We must suffer with these old farts, but we need not allow *their* hangups to be *our* hangups.)

Bottom line, then: outdated attitudes continue to prevail throughout the genre. Bad writers justify their work and the Brobdingnagian publishers' advances they get by puffing up with the assertion that they write "true science fiction." Well, they're welcome to it, if they believe the value of the work lies in nothing but thunderous concepts flung through enormous vistas of space, sans emotion, sans people, sans wit, sans anything but hardware. It is writing more allied with the preparation of technical journals than it is with the heritage of

Melville, Twain, Shelley and Borges.

I urge all of you seeking careers as writers, to eschew this dead end. Leave it to the amateurs who make their livings as technicians or engineers with an occasional foray into fiction that is merely the mythologizing of their current "heuristic situation." Ten years from now their stories will be as forgotten, as unreadable, as the entire contents of issues of 50's and 60's Campbell *Analogs* are today.

The only stories that live on, that are worth "the agony and the sweat" of writing, are the ones that speak with force to the human condition. *Star Wars* is amusing, but please don't confuse it with *Citizen Kane*, *Taxi Driver* or *The Conversation*.

Writing about people should be your mission.

Which brings us back to the proper place for this essay, after a digression informed more by anger and impatience than a sense of propriety. I beg your pardon.

#

If you'll accept my messianic fervor as regards the *reason* for writing, then it follows that creating (not real but) verisimilitudinous people — go look up the word verisimilitude *now* — is mandatory. It also requires very nearly more art than any other aspect of writing. It entails keen observation of people, attention to

detail, wide knowledge of habit patterns and sociological underpinnings for otherwise irrational or overfamiliar habits, cultural trends, familiarity with dress and speech and physical attributes, fads, psychology and the ways in which people say things other than what they mean.

It means being mature enough, and empathic enough, and tough enough to be able to capsule a human being of your own creating, in a line or, at most, a paragraph. A single act or habit would be ideal. Lean! Lean and fatless, a minimum of words! The fewest possible words to obfuscate that moment of recognition. The writing must be lean and hard!

Read this:

A man has a shape; a crowd has no shape and no color. The massed faces of a hundred thousand men make one blank pallor; their clothes add up to a shadow; they have no words. This man might have been one hundred-thousandth part of the featureless whiteness, the dull grayness, and the toneless murmuring of a docile multitude. He was something less than nondescript — he was blurred, without identity, like a smudged fingerprint. His suit was of some dim shade between brown and gray. His shirt had gray-blue stripes, his tie was patterned with dots like confetti trodden into the dust, and his oddment

of limp brownish mustache resembled a cigarette-butt, disintegrating shred by shred in a tea-saucer.

That was the late Gerald Kersh, describing the indescribable: a man with no outstanding characteristics, a plain man, an invisible man, a little soul never examined and a presence instantly forgotten. The words do the trick, of course, but consider the images. Precise. Lean. Hard. Not cynical but utterly pragmatic. Confetti in the dust, a smudged fingerprint, a cigarette butt disintegrating in a saucer. Exact. Evocative. And in sum the images and the choice of words — self-censorship at its most creative and intelligent and productive level — give us a description of that which cannot be described. The only other example of this I've ever encountered was Coppola's cinematic characterization of the professional electronic bugger, Harry Caul, in *The Conversation*. As critic Pauline Kael describes him, he is "a compulsive loner (Gene Hackman), a wizard at electronic surveillance who is so afraid others will spy on him that he empties his life; he's a cipher — a cipher in torment. There's nothing to discover about him, and *still* he's in terror of being bugged." Coppola's writing, combined with Hackman's subtle sense of his own anonymity, described the indescribable: a man who is a shadow. And both Kersh and Coppola did it with the barest

possible delineation. Lean, hard, precise!

Thus, what I'm suggesting as an imperative for the writer who wishes to create stories of power and immediacy, is the tough and unrelenting process of describing characters in a few words, by special and particular attributes. The swordsman's grin, Heep's hand-washing, Scarlett's interior will to survive even in the face of consummate disaster. I'll give you a few more examples.

In Edmund Wilson's justly-famous story "The Man Who Shot Snapping Turtles" we have a character named Asa M. Stryker (note the name as descriptive tool) who is obsessed with the predatory chelonians that lurk in his pond and drag down the little ducklings he admires. The obsession grows until Stryker goes into the turtle soup business. He becomes more and more snapperlike until his movements and manner become paradigmatic of the very creatures he has devoted his life to vanquishing. Here is a bit from the story:

...Stryker, at ease in his turbid room, upended, as it were, behind his desk, with a broad expanse of plastron and a rubbery craning neck, regarding him with small bright eyes set back in the brownish skin beyond a prominent snoutlike formation of which the nostrils were sharply in evidence...

Wilson uses the device of direct analogy to demonstrate the subtext of the story: Stryker became what he beheld. It is one method of characterizing a player. It is a variation of the Disney Studios manner of humanizing animals or inanimate objects like pencils or garbage cans by anthropomorphizing them. Wilson's technique, technically known as anthroposcopy, character-reading from facial features, can be used as straight one-for-one value-judgment or as misdirection, where precisely the opposite of what a person looks like indicates his or her nature. Take Victor Hugo's Quasimodo, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, as an example.

Chekhov once admonished young playwrights, "If, in act one you have a pistol hanging on the wall, be assured it is fired before the end of act two." His meaning is clear. Include nothing irrelevant. But if you set something up, you'd damned well better make it pay off.

The same goes for character traits. Take BILLY BUDD, for instance. Melville tells us that Billy stammers. But only at certain times. When he is confronted by mendacity, duplicity, evil. Symbolically, we can take this to mean that Billy, as a corporeal manifestation of Goodness in a Mean World, is rendered *tabula rasa* by Evil Incarnate. That would be the academic view. But as a writer I

choose to see the stammer as a plot-device. The inability to defend himself is used near the climax of the novella as the mechanism by which Billy's fate is sealed. Herman Melville was a great writer, but he was a *writer* first. He knew how to plot. He knew the pistol had to be fired.

Historically, such physical infirmities were used by writers such as Hawthorne to indicate inner flaws. The Reverend Dimmesdale, in THE SCARLET LETTER, has a burning scar on his chest. He is an adulterer. The scar is the outward manifestation of what he feels in his inner sin. When he bares his bosom to the entire congregation, it is a shocking moment. The pistol has been fired.

Shakespeare goes even further. Probably because his talent was greater than anyone else's. More than merely using physical mannerisms or frailties, he uses the forces of Nature in all their unleashed passion to reflect the viewpoint character's state of mind. In Act II, scene iv of *King Lear*, at the very moment that he wanders out onto the heath, having renounced his power while trying to retain his title, having been driven to the point of madness by his daughters, who have thrown him out of their homes, we find the following:

LEAR

... You think I'll weep;
No, I'll not weep:

I have full cause of weeping;
but this heart
Shall break into a hundred
thousand flaws,
Or ere I'll weep. O fool,
I shall go mad!

At which point the storm and tempest break. Shakespeare mirrors Lear's instant of going insane with Nature's loosing of all its mad passion. He tells us that Lear realizes, in that moment of final lucidity before the plunge into madness, that in this life there can be no separation of title and power. That to retain the former, one must have the latter to buttress it. He has given over his power, and Nature has assumed it. He is alone, beaten, tragic, defenseless before Man and Nature.

It is mythic characterization on a cosmic level.

Less grand in its scope, but as revealing in its placement of a human being within the context of his society, is the little trick Turgenev uses to show us that Paul Petrovich of *FATHERS AND SONS* feels displaced. The novel was written at that time in Russian history when the serfs were revolting, and it is a time of ambivalence, dichotomous vacillation between the traditions of the aristocracy and the pull of rule by the common man. To demonstrate Petrovich's uncertainty, Turgenev has a meeting between Petrovich and his young adult student

nephew, after many years, contain a moment in which the elder not only shakes hands in the "European manner" but kisses him "thrice in the Russian fashion, that is to say, he brushed his cheeks thrice with his scented moustaches, exclaiming, 'Welcome home!'"

Alfred Bester's *THE STARS, MY DESTINATION* is a classic novel to read and re-read for such minutiae of characterization. Gully Foyle, the protagonist, for instance, has his progression and growth of character from near-bestial lout to cultured avenger epitomized by his language and manner of speech. At first he speaks only the gutter slang of the future invented by Bester to micro-mize the era; but as Gully grows and buys himself an education, he speaks in very different, more cadenced patterns. This is paralleled by the visibility of the "tiger mask" that covers his face. When he is a beast, it shows easily; later, it becomes almost invisible, manifesting itself only when his rage makes him revert momentarily. Heinlein's *DOUBLE STAR* is another limitless source-reference, jam-full of this kind of technique. Which is why these two books continue to be thought of as "classics" long after books that made bigger initial splashes have faded from memory.

Budrys once wrote a story, the title of which escapes me right now, in which a very fat man, an

official of some bloated interstellar military-industrial organization, stuffs his mouth with candy bars all through conversations with the hero. Thus, by miniaturized example — arguing from the smaller to the larger — Budrys led us to a perception of the fat man as one, in paradigm, with the fat organization.

A horde of examples from my own work pop to mind, but a sense of propriety prevents my dealing with them in detail. I use a hare-lip sometimes to indicate that a character is a born victim; and men who are punctilious about their hair and clothes usually turn out, in my stories, to be men who get their comeuppance or who are shallow. "Pretty Maggie Money-eyes" has two characters I think are well-formed using the techniques I've enumerated here, and if you get a moment you might look it up. In the script I've written for *Blood's a Rover*, the pilot of the series scheduled for NBC this Fall, based on the novella and the film of "A Boy and His Dog," I introduce a female solo who is as tough as the amoral Vic. Her name is Spike, and at one point in the film she joins up with the dog, Blood. Vic returns, after having split up with Blood, and wants to get together again as partners. But the Spike character is now Blood's partner. To demonstrate that she thinks very little of Vic, when she gets angry, she never talks to *him*,

she talks to the dog. "Tell it to shut its mouth before I blow its head off," she says to the dog, referring to Vic. Blood then repeats what she's said to Vic, who has heard it, of course. This goes on till Vic is driven into a rage. It is a mannerism that will be a continuing in-joke for the film pilot and the series. By talking to a dog about a human, and referring to the human as "it" instead of the animal, I hope to make a point about the way in which men treat women as objects. This, done subtly, because the networks would never permit it if they knew what I was doing ... that is, actually putting in a sub-text and symbolism, heaven forbid ... will serve to deepen the subject matter as visually presented.

I've offered all these examples of minute character traits — tics and tremors — in an attempt to demonstrate that it is possible with extreme economy to create a fully-fleshed player, even if that player is only a walk-on. And when you're getting into the story, a touch like these can set up the reader through many pages of plot and concept, permitting the reader to identify with the viewpoint character. It is a tone that will inform the story throughout.

As a final note, let me hit once again on the core fact that no matter what it is you *think* you're writing about, the best and most significant thing to write about,

what you're *always* writing about, is *people*!

Building people who are believable, verisimilitude being the operable word, not *real people* but *believable people*, is a product of the touches and techniques discussed here.

Or, as John le Carre, the novelist who wrote *THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD* and *THE LOOKING GLASS WAR* among others has said, "A good writer can watch a cat pad across the street and know what it

is to be pounced upon by a Bengal tiger."

Whether pounced upon by a giant cat, explaining why a coward's smile makes his enemies flee, how a careless person can destroy those around her, what hypocrisy lies in an idle drywashing motion of a sycophant's hands, or how a beautiful and kindly man can condemn himself to death because he stammers, if you intend to write well, and write for posterity, or even simply to entertain, you must remember...

Fire the pistol.

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Wednesday is shopping day. It's been that way for several years, and I love it. Most of the week is spent reading, or exercising, or practicing, but goddamnit, I love shopping.

There's always an extra little bounce when I fly out of bed on Wednesday, an extra little spring as I go to brush my teeth.

Hygiene is very important. That's something my mother taught me. "You can't ignore hygiene," she used to say.

I thought about my mother as the toothbrush whirled in my mouth that morning. I thought about my mother and my father. And Helen. Especially Helen. I swelled just thinking about her. But then I thought about the three of them on the breakfast table that morning, and what they were doing, and what a pain it was to clean up the bodies, so I deflated.

I ran from the bathroom to my bedroom to get dressed, trying to keep my eyes from the holovision in the corner of the room. Even not looking, I could hear it calling me, saying "Activate me! Activate me! Today might be the day!" Of course, I knew that that son-of-a-bitching machine was lying to me, but I activated it anyway.

The lasers shot into existence and a picture of Parker Henshaw, the local newscaster, formed.

The Last Sane Man on the Island of "Madhattan"

He could
cure the city's
madness –
if it didn't kill him first.

by Bruce Kent



James Glenn

"And now," his smiling face said, "for today's noose." The picture changed to a woman being dragged up a scaffold in the studio. "Let me go," she was screaming as they placed the noose around her neck, "I have to get back to Agincourt."

I hit the cancel button and the aitchvee died. I didn't even look around the channels this time. I knew what I would find. Nothing, goddamnit. Not a word from the outside world. Resigned, I began to get dressed.

My wardrobe isn't that extensive, but it's nicer than the usual gaga-on-the-street's, so I could be a little choosy. After all, shopping's important. First thing, I chose my favorite T-shirt. It was given to me many years ago by my father, who had worn it when he was young. It was a gold shirt, with a picture on the front, and only two small holes, one under the left arm and the other in front, where it would be hidden once I tucked it into my pants. Frankly, I don't know who the picture is of. The chuckie looks like he came out of the 1950s, but Dad wasn't born until 1961. He never referred to the man in the picture by name, only by title — the phonz. Anyway, it's a great shirt, even if it is a little too small.

Pants were harder. No real favorites. I finally decided on the brown ones that balloon at the knees and taper at the ankles. The style hadn't been worn in years,

but they were comfortable. They also fit well into my boots, which are necessary, especially when you consider all the dogs running around, leaving surprises for the unwary chuckie. Just a few more things and I would be ready to leave the homespot.

I ran to the kitchen for breakfast and a shopping list. Rummaging through the cold-stasis box, I saw some bread, chocolate, and a few cans of something. Shoving a slice of bread in my mouth, I went through my other cabinets. Milk and meat. That was what I needed. Thank God the federal government kept the Automated Supply Lines open. They weren't too efficient, but for those two items, they were adequate.

Later, I donned a khaki rucksack that had belonged to one of my older brothers during India. But as I stepped out of the kitchen, I was ready for the most important part of my wardrobe. The part that separated me from all the head cases on the streets. Out of a drawer in my dresser I took my ammo belt and strapped it on. Then, with care, I took out my holster and my Magnum. Removing the gun, I checked it to make sure it was oiled and loaded. It was, of course; I had done that just last night.

I clipped the holster in place on my belt. Then I practiced some quick draws, just to make sure everything was okay. It was. I'm

the best gunman in lower Manhattan. Probably upper Manhattan also. The time had come to begin shopping. The Last Sane Man on the Island of "Madhattan" was emerging for another go.

"The field is beginning to disrupt, Dr. Kirkwood. We're going through."

I nodded at Crain, my pilot/bodyguard and male nurse. After years of arguing, cajoling, even blackmailing, I had finally won my point with Washington. We were going into Manhattan.

Through the window, I could see ahead of me what looked like yellow haze slowly parting, forming a hole for my ambulift to get through.

I wondered for a moment if any of the poor lunatics down below were watching. It didn't seem likely to me. From the reports the government receives, everybody is wrapped up in just trying to stay alive. Besides which, I felt, the hole made for the ambulift wouldn't be large enough to be seen.

Seconds later, we broke through, the force field closing rapidly behind us. Instead of looking out over the island, I looked towards the back of the ambulift, at the emergency bed where the serum lay. My serum. Those blithering idiots down in Washington had given up on "Madhattan" long ago, but I hadn't.

"Where to, Doc?" asked Crain, lighting an ersatz-tube. Crain was behaving like this wasn't a monumental undertaking. I almost laughed. It wasn't, to him. Perhaps it wouldn't have been to anyone but me.

"Head downtown, Crain," I suggested.

"Any reason?" he asked. I shrugged my shoulders. No use telling him that that's where the tests had been made. That's where I was going to make my move.

It was almost noon when I wandered into the supermarket on West 29th Street. Today had not been my most conspicuous success. This D'Agostino's was the twelfth store I had visited that morning. The ASL were really screwing up.

The automatic door slid open and I entered the supermarket. Stepping over somebody writhing on the ground, saying "It feels good, it feels good," I took a quick survey. I began to agree with the chuckie on the floor. It was good. Of course, that Grand Union had looked good earlier, and I barely escaped with my life.

I began to stroll down the aisles, heading towards the meat counter. Frankly, shopping for meat is a genuine flaming pain. There is never anything good anymore. There had been some decent looking hamburger in that bodega earlier, but that guy had squatted on it and ... well, he won't be doing

that anymore.

Off in the distance was the dairy section. I could make out the white plastles that meant they had milk. If only it wasn't sour. I began to pray as I moved closer to it. Please, God, don't let the milk be sour.

Reaching into the cold-stasis case, I took out a plastle and examined it. The federal date on it was just that day's, which meant that it had arrived during the night. Perfect. There looked to be six or seven plastles of it. At home, with my cold-stasis box that ran on those batteries that I had found, they would stay good until I finished them.

I hadn't noticed the Puerto Rican kid who snuck up behind me. I realized he was there when he grabbed the plastle from my hands.

"Hey, man," he said, "you not gonna buy that milk, are ya?"

"I was planning on it," I said. With a lunatic, you try to stop the conversation before it gets started.

"No you ain't, man. I made a deal. I'm sellin' it back to the cow." It was happening again.

"Look, chuckita," I said, grabbing the plastle back, "how do you know the cow wants it?"

His turn to grab the plastle. "I talked to it, man."

"What seems to be the problem here?" asked a man in a white apron. "I'm the manager of the store." He sounded sane, but I

never put any belief in appearances anymore.

"I want to buy this milk, and this chuckie won't let me."

"It belongs to the cow, man," said the youth.

The manager of the store smiled and took the plastle. "Well, I have the solution to your problem. Neither of you can have any milk."

"Why not?" I asked, realizing full well that I would probably regret hearing the answer.

"It's Tuesday, and I have a rule that I never sell anything white on Tuesday."

"Miercoles," said the chuckita, grabbing the plastle from the manager.

"What?"

"It's Wednesday, man." My hand began to reach for my gun. I wanted that milk.

The manager was no longer smiling. "Lousy spic," he mumbled, and aimed a kick between the chuckita's legs. The P.R. went down.

"Hey, mister," came a voice from below. I looked down and saw a little girl tugging on my pants leg. "Hey, mister," she repeated, "you gonna shoot the creepy flamer?" I didn't answer her, just kept my hand on the gun.

The manager, in the meantime, had begun to jump on the plastle. Plastles are good, but they can only take so much. Finally, it broke, milk spilling all over the

place. The manager smiled and reached for another plastle. That was too much for me. I pulled the gun and fired.

The bullet entered his head at the temple. He never even knew he was dead. He slammed against a wall of shelves, then slowly, the way I like it, he slid to the floor.

Moving quickly, I loaded my rucksack with the remaining plastles and got out of the supermarket. My last sight was the little girl, who couldn't have been much more than four, watching, goggle-eyed, the blood mixing with the milk.

The streets weren't deserted entirely, but I saw very few people. Few people but many bodies. All I needed was one person. If I could cure one person, the government would finance the entire cure.

In the corner of what was once Union Square (God only knows what it had become) I spotted a person running. Quickly I tapped Crain on the shoulder. "There," I said, pointing. Crain aimed the ambulift and we swooped into a landing.

The moving body, male and about 30, stopped and stared at us. Gently, slowly, I moved from the ambulift and onto the sidewalk.

"Don't be afraid," I called, "I'm not going to harm you."

"Afraid?" he answered in a high-pitched voice, "who's afraid?"

I felt relieved. I looked over the man who I was sure was going to be my first cure. He was blonde, tall and goodlooking. I couldn't tell for a moment what his particular problem was. "I'm from the outside world," I said.

"I know you are," he replied. "I can tell a stratosled when I see one."

His term puzzled me, but I had no time to explore it. "I would like you to come with me," I said.

He laughed. "Does Ming think I would fall so easily? Take this, cur." With that, he pulled a laser-gun from his coat pocket and fired. Fortunately, his aim was bad and he missed both me and the ambulift.

Crain's trunk-rifle protruded from the ambulift, but he never got to use it. The madman took off on a dead run, screaming "I'll recover Dale yet, alien." I didn't feel like chasing him.

The sun beat down through the yellow haze of the force field late that afternoon. I was hot, I was tired, and I was meatless. Damn, but the afternoon had been frustrating. After lunch at my apartment (one of the cans; it turned out to be beets. I had hoped it would be peaches), I moved out again, hoping to cover some of the stores I had missed. I made about six more, but nothing much was to be found. I only reloaded my gun once.

I was nearing Madison Avenue when I heard a scream. Naturally, screams are common nowadays, so I didn't give it much thought. But it came again, louder and more urgent. This time I stopped and listened.

The third time I targeted it in an alley off 16th. I drew my gun and moved slowly towards the noise. My mind was filled with the comix of my youth. Saneman! Champion of the mentally undisturbed, who can withstand the ravages of galloping craziness. I laughed out loud, I enjoyed the image so much.

A fourth scream came, this one mixed with tears. I moved faster, reaching the mouth of the alley. Skidding to a halt, I saw the jackie the screams were coming from. I saw a lot more of her than she probably wanted, since her shirt was practically ripped to the waist, and the pants she had worn were lying next to her. On top of her was this chuckie in a gorilla suit. Without thinking about it, I fired the Magnum. The gorilla's head disappeared, and he collapsed.

The jackie gave another scream and began to sob. For all I knew, I had killed her lover. Or her father. But she looked like she needed comforting so badly, I holstered my gun and went to her, kicking the gorilla off her body.

It was a beautiful body. She was blonde, with long flowing locks, which were plastered to her with her sweat and his blood. Her eyes

were wide apart, and clear blue, even through the tears. Her nose was small, upturned and the cutest nose I had ever seen. I think I began to fall in love.

"Hey," I said, kneeling next to her, "it's all right now." I kept a careful eye open for anything she might be holding.

"Thank you," she stopped sniffing long enough to say. Score one for me.

"You're welcome." I'm a great little conversationalist. "What happened?"

"That monster attacked me. The bastard." She pulled herself up to a sitting position and eyed me cautiously. "Are you going to attack me now?" She tried covering her breasts with what little cloth was left on her upper torso. They were too nice, though, to be covered.

I smiled and shook my head. "No, I wait to be asked first."

She gave me a small, hesitant smile. "What's your name?"

"Danny Nathanson. Yours?"

"Hilary. Hilary Foxall."

There was a pause. We looked into each other's eyes for awhile. I was trying to find some signs of insanity, but couldn't. "Hilary," I finally said. "That's a nice name."

"Thank you, Danny," came the reply. Another period of silence followed, as if we both were waiting for something to happen. Was it possible that someone else . . . ?

"What do you do?" asked Hilary.

"Try to survive," I answered.

Something came into her face. I wasn't sure what. Realization, perhaps. "My god," she whispered, "you're another one. You're sane, just like me."

I thought for a moment of "The Telltale Heart" by Edgar Allen Poe. All crazy people think they're sane. I had to be sure.

"You think so?" I asked.

"That you're sane? I don't know. You seem it."

I shook my head. "No, I know I'm sane. You sure you're sane?"

She laughed. She had a beautiful laugh, one that, if the two of us were watching a comedy, would have given me trouble listening to the jokes. "Of course, idiot. When the government sealed Manhattan off, I was standing by the East River, screaming."

It was my turn to laugh. "Really? I was by the Hudson, calling 'I'm sane, you flammers, I'm sane.' But they boxed us in anyway."

There was quiet again, but it wasn't the quiet of before. It was more a shared feeling. After years of searching, we had found each other. "Where do you live?" I asked.

"Not far." I held out my hand and she took it. We both stood. She stooped again to pick up her purse. "Keys," she said. We both laughed and left the alley.

We skimmed over lower Man-

hattan, desperate for someone to cure. We landed several times and were shot at, stoned, spat upon, and several things that would make me nauseated to describe.

All through it, I kept remembering the words of the Secretary of HEW: "Paul, you didn't authorize those tests, the army did. They figured it had been over 50 years since the last ones. That it backfired was their fault, not yours." Sure. Only I invented the gas.

"Maybe we should just trunk someone and take him," suggested Crain. It was a sign of my despair that I nodded.

We flew on silently for a while, searching the streets for somebody, anybody. Finally, I suggested that we try it on foot. "Maybe in one of the buildings," I said, "we can find somebody who will trust me."

Crain made a disbelieving noise, but wafted us down onto East 19th Street. All was silent as we left the ambu-lift, Crain cradling his trunk-rifle. He had insisted.

The last time I had been in Manhattan, there had been noise. Groundcars moving, people talking, the whoosh of the pneumatic subway cars as they passed below the streets. Now even that was gone.

"Which building, Doctor?" Crain asked. I looked around. None of them looked in good repair.

A crash drew my attention to one up the block. Crain and I

stared helplessly as a woman came flying out of a fifth floor window.

No words were spoken as we moved through the streets. Hilary's near-nakedness caused one man to attack, but I shot him. Finally we reached her building on East 19th.

We walked, still in silence, up the stairs to the fifth floor, stopping only on the fourth floor landing to kiss. It was a long, passionate kiss, our tongues entwining, her naked breasts crushed against the picture of the phonz I wore. With what little mind I had, I realized that it had been a long time between women.

We climbed the last flight of stairs and, still quiet, still hand in hand, made our way to Hilary's homespot. She dug into her purse for the five keys needed to unlock the door. Obviously practiced movements got the door open in less than a minute, and I stepped over the threshold into what I felt was my future.

It was a very odd room that I entered. The walls were painted black. There was a pentacle on the floor in a corner, in front of an altar.

"Excuse me while I get out of these ripped things," said Hilary. She disappeared through a beaded curtain.

I continued to look around. My eyes began to get used to the gloom. I found candles aplenty,

but no electric lights. Power was erratic, so that made sense. But why was the only window heavily curtained?

I moved over to the altar. There was a picture on it, a picture of a woman with horns.

"The altar is for Satanna, true visage of the devil," came Hilary's voice. I turned and saw her standing by the beaded curtain, totally naked. Her hands were held behind her back.

"True visage of the devil?"

She nodded. "The devil is a woman. Didn't you ever suspect?" I shook my head and moved my hand closer to my gun. "That's how she can lead men to temptation. I realized this shortly before we were sealed off. In fact, I think the authorities sealed Manhattan off to prevent me from spreading the true doctrine."

I swallowed. Hard.

"You saved me, Danny, and Satanna wants to thank you in person." Her hands moved out from behind her body, revealing two very sharp looking blades. She came closer and I pulled my gun. "You can't shoot the high priestess of Satanna, foolish Danny."

"No?" I asked as I squeezed the trigger. The hammer lifted and fell on an empty chamber. I swore to myself. I had forgotten to reload the gun after killing the chuckie in the street.

Hilary smiled beatifically. "You see, foolish Danny? Now just re-

lax. This won't hurt. Soon you will be in Her arms." She was coming closer. I dived, tackling her.

She dropped one of the knives, but not the other. "Why struggle, foolish Danny? It is your destiny." As she was getting to her feet, I ran for the door. It was locked.

I heard her magical laugh behind me. "It is a strong door, Danny. Accept your fate."

I turned and faced her. My hand reached into my belt, taking out cartridges. Then I realized I had dropped the gun when I tackled this head case. Her naked foot kicked it into another room. Again, she smiled and I felt myself melting.

"Danny," she whispered.

With my last bit of willpower, I circled the room, making for the heavily curtained window. She kept coming closer, moving in for the kill.

I reached the window and flung open the drapes. There was no fire escape as I had been hoping.

I fell to my knees. I don't know where I found the strength, but when she came for me, I grabbed her and pushed up. She went flying through the window.

I am first, last and always a doctor. It was my duty to go see if anything could be done for the poor woman. Crain couldn't see it that way.

"For God's sake, Doc, suppose

she didn't fall. Suppose she was pushed. Somebody could be waiting for you. Besides, she's dead."

I held my breath and let it out slowly. "Crain, I make the decisions." With that I turned and ran to the body.

I bent down over her. She was still breathing, but barely. If I could get her to the ambulant, I might be able to cure her body. Then I could start on her mind.

"Crain," I called, "get the air cart."

"Hey," came a voice from the broken window, "is that bitch still alive?"

I looked up. I couldn't see much. "Yes, she is," I yelled back, "she is, and I can help her."

"Get away from the body, chuckie," it answered.

Crain was getting closer, the air cart floating behind him and the trunk-rifle in cocked mode. "I can't get a shot yet, Doc," he said in a stage whisper.

"You won't need it," I whispered back. "Say, up there, I'm from the outside world, and—"

"Shitflame, chuckie, move away from the body. Now!"

"I'm trying to help the woman, damnit." I jumped back when a bullet exploded next to me. More came, and I ran towards Crain.

"A bullet gun," Crain said. "They haven't made one of those since the turn of the century."

I kept silent and watched while my patient died.

Hilary was finally dead. I reloaded and felt better. Now all I had to deal with was the chuckie who said he was from the outside world.

"Hey, down there," I called, "you from the outside."

A thin voice answered back, "Yes?"

"You tagged?"

"Kirkwood. Dr. Paul Kirkwood."

I laughed. "You gonna cure me?"

The thin voice sounded hopeful. "Yes. Yes I am."

I laughed again. "You flamer, I am sane. It's you who's gaga." I fired in the direction of the voice.

"Listen," it came up to me, "could we talk face to face?" I smiled. The fool was going to come point blank. Maybe he had food on him. "Sure. Why not? You can meet the Only Sane Man in 'Madhattan.'" I gave him the homespot number. Then I pulled back the hammer of my Magnum and waited.

Crain insisted that I take a precaution, and forced me to take a trunk-derringer that he had in his pocket. I knew for a fact that I wouldn't be able to hit the broad side of an apartment building if it were ten feet away from me, but I took it to make him happy.

The stairs were not in good shape. Years of neglect and dog and rat excrement had taken their

toll. From behind one door I could hear, very loudly, somebody playing a 3.5 music tape at 7. It sounded like those chipmunks I remember from my childhood. I saw nobody as I approached the homespot.

Slowly I knocked on the door. A sound came from within. "That you, Kirkwood?"

"It's me, uh . . ." I had never asked the madman his name.

"The name's Nathanson. Danny Nathanson."

"May I come in, Mr. Nathanson?"

I heard laughter. "Sure, Kirkwood. Nobody's stopping you."

I opened the door slowly. Nathanson was there, all right, pointing his gun right at my head. "Come in, Kirkwood."

His hair was long and his beard unkempt, just like the radicals from the sixties I had known. I chuckled to myself.

"Something funny, Kirkwood?"

"No, no, it's just that . . . well, you look like I did fifty years ago."

He sneered. "I'm 35. I wouldn't remember."

I nodded. "True. That's an interesting shirt." I had to keep him talking until he began to trust me.

He smiled. "It's one of my favorites. Do you know what a phonz is?"

My turn to smile. I could smile,

as long as I didn't look into his eyes. "I remember him. He was a character in a TV show during the late seventies."

"TV?"

"Like aitchvee, only flat."

He nodded. I told him what I remembered about "Happy Days," and anything I could think of about Henry Winkler's later career. Finally, I thought I could take a chance. "Listen, Danny, if you'll let me, I could cure you."

He spat. "Cure me? I'm sane, chuckie. The only one around here who needs a cure is you. And I've got some lead just for that."

I pointed my gun. The old gaga looked like he was gonna piss in his pants. "Bye-bye, chuckie," I said.

For an oldie, though, he moved quickly. He brought up some kind of little dart gun and fired. Missed by a mile but he threw himself on the ground right after, making me miss.

I'm not the type who likes to miss. It doesn't do my ego or my reputation very good. I began to take careful aim. The senior chuckie was crawling out of sight,

but I knew he couldn't crawl fast enough. I had moved into position when the door slammed open. I whirled, but this new chuckie with some kind of rifle was too quick for me. I felt a dart go into my shoulder.

"Bastard," I said, as I lost my coordination. My Magnum fell to the floor. As I blacked out, I cursed the madness around me, the madness that had finally defeated me. I had tried.

It wasn't easy to tell Crain that I was glad to see him, but I managed. He just grinned.

The air cart was outside the door, so we loaded Nathanson onto it and headed for the ambulance. From there we would take him across the Hudson to a hospital in Jersey. I didn't know whether or not I could cure him, but I was hopeful.

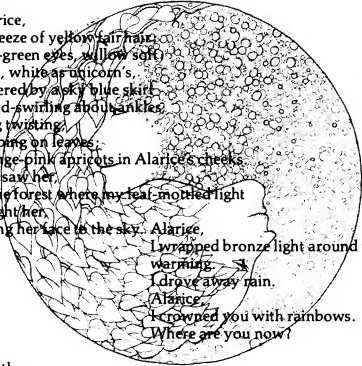
I took a quick glance at the setting sun, bright orange through the yellow force field. Maybe "Madhattan" had affected me, but it looked for a moment, just a moment mind you, like the face of God smiling down on me. I had my second chance.

It's Coming It's Coming It's Coming

What's coming? A thoroughly unique competition — the UNEARTH Story Contest. It's different, it's exciting, and it will be rewarding. Watch for the details in the First Anniversary Issue, UNEARTH #5, available this November.

Alarice, Aristhe

by Caroline Dechert



Alarice,
a breeze of yellow fair hair;
tree-green eyes, willow soft;
skin, white as unicorn's,
covered by a sky blue skirt,
cloud-swirling about ankles,
twig twisting,
tripping on leaves;
orange-pink apricots in Alarice's cheeks.
So I saw her,
in the forest where my leaf-mottled light
caught her,
lifting her face to the sky. Alarice,
I wrapped bronze light around you,
warming.
I drove away rain.
Alarice,
I crowned you with rainbows.
Where are you now?

Aristhe,
topaz hair, tiger eye striped;
emeralds shining, sparkling in her eyes;
skin of translucent white moonstone
hidden by turquoise skirts
collected,
shining satin

beside her legs;
Aristhe asleep, unmoving.
So we saw her
by the river where our starlight reflected,
shining,
from the water to her face. Aristhe,

when night came we caught you,
brought you
in from forest running.
Brought you
a lover,
his power unequaled
in our diamond light.

Alarice, Aristhe,
goldfish hide in her hair,
swim past algae eyes
set in mother-of-pearl;
sea blue skirts lift, swaying,
ballooning,
drifting with the water,
soft and cool.
Aristhe, Alarice,
so I saw her
lying as her lover left her,
in a river, by trees,
under moonlight.

Alarice, Aristhe,

I alone saw you by both day and night.
I saw the sun warm you
and the stars freeze you.
I see you as you lie
in water.
I watch over you
when I can.

First Sale



In each issue, UNEARTH presents a unique special feature — the first story ever sold by a major author.

Norman Spinrad

*He has been, during his decade and a half in SF, one of the field's most consistently brilliant and audacious writers. He routinely tackles the most challenging themes (as in **Bug Jack Barron**, **The Iron Dream**, "The Weed of Times," "The Big Flash," and the classic "Riding the Torch"), bringing them off with wit and flair. His fiction is almost always insightful, often brutally funny.*

*As editor, he put together **Modern Science Fiction**, an indispensable reference source as well as a landmark anthology.*

Here is where his career began: "The Last of the Romany," Norman Spinrad's First Sale.

INTRODUCTION

Truth be told, the origins of **THE LAST OF THE ROMANY** are rather dim in my memory, even though one might think that the history of one's first published story would be forever clearly etched in the personal annals of the mind.

Selling the story, of course, I remember quite precisely. It was 1962, I was living in a seedy (to say the least) \$34 a month apartment in New York's East Village, I was 22, I had been out of college for a year, and I was working part-time in a friend's custom carpentry shop to pay the rent and buy food while engaged in a somewhat naive but quite logically-thought-out campaign to become a full-time science fiction writer.

During my college career I had majored in just about anything you could think of — engineering, chemistry, psychology, political science, I think was the basic progression. Since junior high school, I had dabbled now and again with writing short stories in longhand in spiral notebooks, and I suppose in the back of my head somewhere was the vague desire to be a writer. However, this was strictly a private back-street affair

— I had never been involved with school newspapers or literary magazines. Not, I think, because I lacked the confidence to expose my tentative efforts to the light of day, but because my attitude towards “extra-curricular activities” was one of cynical suspicion and proto-revolutionary loathing. School was something to be endured, like an indeterminate sentence in the slam, and I'd be damned if I'd be conned into volunteering my presence for more than the legally-required collaboration time with the pedagogical turnkeys. As for publicly expressing my fantasies of being a full-time 100% writer, the parental response would have been sage advice to become an orthodontist or a brain-surgeon first and play with my typewriter in my spare time.

So I goofed my way through three years of college fantasizing about a literary career, aceing my way through every course I took but integral calculus, hanging out in the lunchroom with the other beatniks, and changing majors about as often as underwear. Before I knew it, I was a senior, and when I added up the numbers, I found that, while I had passed all the courses required for graduation, I didn't have the requisite 24 credits in *any* major to secure a diploma and a pass out into the real world, whatever the fuck *that* was. And of course my parents were getting worried about my future professional career.

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So, after sniffing around, I came up with an angle, a Catch-22 clause in the college rulebook. I announced to one and all that I was going to become a lawyer. A pre-law major could be 24 credits worth of just about anything, provided that you took two terms of Constitutional Law, and proved one's bona fides by taking the Law School Aptitude Test and getting into some law school before graduation. Also, what red-blooded Jewish parents wouldn't be mollified by such gold-plated intentions?

So I became a pre-law major, aced the Law School Aptitude Test, got into Fordham, and thereby beat the system, both parental and scholastic. This also enabled me to fill out my "pre-law" major with just about anything — Oriental Art, Japanese Civilization, Asian Literature. And two terms of short story writing.

In the second term of short story writing, the professor, despairing of the pallid pseudo-literary gook he was reading and himself a published magazine writer, urged us to produce something more muscular, outré, and daring for our final assignment. I responded with the first science fiction story I had dared to submit as a class assignment — the advice one got in such classes in those days was "write what you know about," which, if you think about it, is a totally

cretinous dictum to college students, who have much more in the area of imagination than worldly experience.

The story I submitted was not only science fiction, but . . . well, *pretty foul*. In the climactic scene, the hero and heroine fuck in a bathtubful of Hershey's Chocolate Syrup while the world destroys itself in a nuclear holocaust. He wanted daring?

Well the good professor found this tale so gross that he refused to allow me to read it in class, as was the custom. However, as a veteran of commercial writing, he knew talent when he saw it, and he also had an idea of what was to be done with a potentially salable story that was not quite right for the college literary magazine. Irwin Stark was his name, and for the little talk we had after he handed me back the manuscript with a slightly glazed expression, I shall always be grateful.

"You should try to sell this," he said. "To *Playboy*. They pay \$1500."

"I should? They do? What do I have to do?"

"Stick it in an envelope. Enclose a postage-paid return envelope in case they bounce it. If they do bounce it, despair not. Get a copy of *Writer's Yearbook* and keep sending it out to magazines the same way until it gets bought or you run out of places to send it. In

descending order of payment, of course."

Well Prof. Stark's advice was the epiphany that made me a writer. In the years since, I must have been asked how one becomes a writer a thousand times. I've never understood what people expect to hear, what paranoid fantasies fill their aspiring brains. All I ever tell them is what Professor Stark told me. You write the stories. You mail them to magazines. You get them back. You keep mailing them out.

Why have I made it as a writer when so many other talented kids don't? Maybe because I realized as soon as I heard it that that's all there is to it. No mystery, no machiavellian machinations needed, no Secret Masters of Magazinedom. That's all there is, there ain't no more.

Well, the fucking-in-chocolate-syrup story didn't sell to *Playboy* or to anyone else until years later when it was picked up by a stiffer mag called *Broadside* who wanted my then-established name on the cover. But I had learned the secret. Take every story you write, good, bad, or indifferent, type it up decently, and keep sending it out.

Well, now I knew what I wanted to do, and I knew how to do it, so I did it. Came the fall, I didn't go to law school, I got the cheapo apartment in the East Village, took part time jobs first in a sandal-shop and

then in the carpentry shop, and systematically set out to make it as a writer. I wrote new stories — I tried to turn out one a week. I took all the stories I had ever written, rewrote them as best I could, and kept sending them out too. I did this for about a year before John W. Campbell, Jr. finally bought **THE LAST OF THE ROMANY** for *Analog*. After sitting on it for about six months, by the way. Making me perhaps the last major discovery in Campbell's long string.

As to **THE LAST OF THE ROMANY** itself. . . . I think I must have written the original version in longhand in one of those spiral notebooks when I was about sixteen, possibly under another long-forgotten title. I rewrote it when I embarked on my campaign to become a writer. I sent it around to all the science fiction magazines. They all bounced it. I reworked it *again*, changed the title to "**THE LAST OF THE ROMANY**," (a good idea to change the title if you rewrite for a second go-round) and Campbell finally bought the version you see in *Unearth*.

Strange to say, or perhaps not so strange, the final version of the story is not very different from the original illegible notebook scribbling, in terms of the major character, the theme, or the events. I simply kept writing the same story over and over again until I was a good enough writer to pro-

duce a version that worked. The improvements were not in character, theme, or plot, but in sense of scene, form, and style. Which seems to me characteristic of most science fiction writers' careers in general. I think most of us are attracted to writing the stuff in the first place by the imaginative possibilities, the transcendental romanticism, the potential for dealing with themes of grandeur and cosmic scope. We think big from the beginning, or we'd be writing something else, something more autobiographical, more inwardly-involutd, more close-to-home, more "writing what you know," more ... uh ... *mainstream*. Mainstream writers seem to begin with fairly autobiographical material and use it to master form, style, and keenness of insight, and only later expand their philosophical horizons and the reach of their imagination, if they do so at all. Science fiction writers, on the other hand, seem to grow by *beginning* with more imaginative, philosophical, and ambitious material at the outset of their careers and improving their sense of scene, style, and form until their technical grasp finally reaches the level of their thematic obsessions.

THE LAST OF THE ROMANY is a pretty good example of this process, and in a way, is also *about* it. At least when I wrote the original version, I was heavily influenced by Bradbury. The roman-

tic loner versus a sterile dehumanizing society is certainly a dominant Bradbury theme, as is the attempt to recapture a certain romantic innocence through the children of the species. And of course, in a slightly different sense, that's what *Sense of Wonder* is all about too, so in a way THE LAST OF THE ROMANY is in some way about the essential esthetic of science fiction as well. Miklos, the last gypsy, spinning his tales for children, is also the science fiction writer in a prosaic world. An anti-Barry Malzberg, if you will, with space travel seen not as the image of sterile dehumanization that it has largely become in these post-Apollo days, but as the last refuge of the romantic gypsy spirit.

In the earlier versions, I think I was trying to some degree to write this romantic Bradburyesque story in a self-conscious pseudo-Bradburyian style. It only became publishable when I abandoned this mannered style (though vestiges of it may remain) and found something more like my own true voice. The story stayed the same, but the style refined itself, and that seems to have made the difference between a manuscript in the trunk and a first sale in a magazine. A first sale to John Campbell, yet, who was not exactly known for his predilection for this sort of romanticism.

But then, I've always believed that people who thought they knew

what was and what was not a "Campbell story" grossly underestimated the man's editorial acumen. Any supposed "hard science" fanatic who could discover Sturgeon, Van Vogt, and publish eight installments of

DUNE too could see his way clear to buying a first story of THE LAST OF THE ROMANY's "un-Analog" ilk, as he self-evidently did. There's a lesson in there somewhere.

The Last of the Romany

"It's been a long hot journey," said the man with the waxed mustache. "A Collins please, bartender."

The fat bartender reached over to the console, punched the "Collins" button, and asked "Gin, rum, vodka or grahooley?"

"Gin, of course," said the man with the waxed mustache. "A grahooley Collins indeed!" He lit up a large olive-green cigar.

The bartender punched the "gin" button, and tapped the serve bar. The clear plastic container of cloudy liquid popped up through the serving hole in the bar.

The man with the waxed black mustache looked at the drink, and then at the console, and then at the bartender. "Do not think me rude,

my friend," he said, "but I've always wondered why there are still bartenders, when anyone could press those silly buttons."

The bartender laughed, a fat good-natured laugh. "Why are there bus drivers on robot buses? Why are there brewers when the beer practically brews itself? I guess the government figures that if everyone who was unnecessary was fired, they'd have a hundred million unemployed on their hands."

The man with the mustache, who called himself Miklos, toyed with the battered guitar, which leaned against the bar. "I'm sorry my friend, for my remark," he said "Actually, bartenders are still useful. Could I talk to that machine? And they still don't have an automatic bouncer."

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"Oh?" said the bartender, leaning close to Miklos. "I was in Tokyo last year, and there they have a great padded hook that drops from the ceiling, grabs a drunk, and heaves him out the door. All untouched by human hands. Ah, science!"

Miklos scowled, and then brightened. "Ah, but the bartender still must decide who to bounce! A very delicate task, not to be trusted to a machine. Therefore, a bartender will always be necessary. Another Collins, please."

"Why are you so concerned with my usefulness?" asked the bartender, punching out another Collins.

The man with the waxed black mustache and the weather-tanned face became very serious. "It is one of the things I search for in my travels," he said. "It is very important."

"What is?"

"Men who are still useful," said Miklos. "They are like rare birds. When I spot one, it makes my whole day. I'm sort of a people watcher."

"You travel a lot?" asked the bartender, with a little laugh. "You must be one of the idle rich."

"No," said Miklos without smiling. "It's part of my job to travel."

"Job? What kind of job? There are no more traveling salesmen, and you hardly look like a pilot—"

Miklos puffed thoughtfully on his cigar. "It is a hard thing to explain," he said. "Actually, there are two jobs. But if I succeed in one, the other is unnecessary. The first job is to search."

"To search for what?"

The man with the waxed mustache picked up his guitar and fiddled with the strings. "To search," he said, "for the Romany."

"The what?"

"The Romany, man! Gypsies."

The bartender gave him a queer look. "Gypsies? There aren't any Gypsies left. It wouldn't be permitted."

"You're telling me?" said Miklos, sighing. "For fourteen years I have searched for the Romany. I've hitched, when nobody hitches, I've bummed when nobody bums. I've looked in fifty states and six continents. I even went to the Spanish caves, and do you know what? They have a big mechanical display there now. Robot Romany! Flamenco machines. The things even pass a metal hat around. But the Romany are gone. And yet, some day, somewhere . . . Maybe you could . . . perhaps you would . . .?"

"Me?" said the bartender, drawing away from the man with the mustache.

"Ah, but of course not. Nobody knows. And of course, everyone thinks I'm crazy. But let me tell you, my friend, crazy is strictly relative. I think you're all crazy."

Nothing personal, you understand. It's this dry, clean, shiny Romany-killing world that's crazy. But come close, and I'll let you in on a secret."

Miklos stuck his face in the bartender's ear. "They have not killed the Romany," he whispered. Then louder: "I am the last Romany. That's the other job, to keep it all alive until I can find them. It's a good joke on the world. They try to kill the Romany, and when they fail, they try harder. But it is good for them that they do not succeed for it is the Romany that keeps them alive. They don't know it, but when I am gone, they will die. Oh, they'll walk around in their nice, antiseptic cities for a few hundred years before they realize it, but for all practical purposes, they'll be dead."

"Sure," said the bartender. "Sure."

The man with the waxed black mustache frowned heavily. "I'm sorry," he said. "Sometimes I forget that I'm crazy, and then I become crazier. A neat paradox, no?"

"You sound like an educated man," said the bartender, "a not-stupid man. How come you can't get a job?"

Miklos raised his head proudly. "Can't get a job! Sir, before I became Miklos, the Last Romany, I was assistant vice president in charge of sales for General Aircon-

ditioning. I am a moderately wealthy man. I know what success in this boring world is. You can have it."

"But with your money . . ."

"Bah! I wanted to see the exotic Orient, for example, so what was there? Tokyo was New York, Hong Kong was Chicago, Macao was Philadelphia. Far Samarkand is now a Russian rocket port. It's all gone. The Baghdad of the Caliphs, the China of Kubla Khan, Far Samarkand, Cairo . . . Oh, the cities are still there, but so what? They're all the same, all neat and clean and shiny."

"You ought to be glad," said the bartender. "They cleaned up the opium traffic and the prostitution. They licked malaria and yellow fever — even dysentery. They got the beggars off the streets, and built sanitary markets for the street vendors. I was in Tokyo, as I said, and it's every bit as modern as New York."

Miklos snorted cigar smoke. "And while they were at it, they replaced the Caliphs and Sultans and Khans with City Managers. Feh!"

"Well," said the bartender, "you can't please everybody. Most folks like things the way they are."

"They think they do. Ah well, I've got things to do. Can you tell me where there's a playground?"

"A playground? You wanna play golf or something?"

"No, no, a *children's* playground."

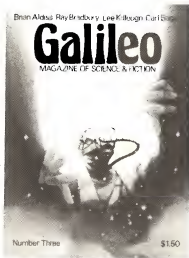
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"There's one three blocks west of here," said the bartender, "but what do you want there?"

"It's part of the job, my friend," said Miklos, getting up and hoisting his guitar to his shoulder. "It keeps me from thinking too much and doing too little, and besides, who knows, maybe it does some little good. Good-by." He left the bar whistling a *chardash*.

"A nut," mumbled the bartender, tossing the used containers into the disposal. "Seems harmless enough, though."

The playground was the standard model, one block square, surrounded by a six-foot force-fence, with one entrance on each side. In addition to the usual exponential hopscotch board, force-slides and basketball grid, there was some newer equipment, including a large tri-D, and a robot watchman. Most of the children were seated on benches in front of the tri-D watching "Modern Lives," the playground educational series. They seemed quite bored, except when, as a sop to their frivolity, someone was hit over the head.

The man with the waxed black mustache and the battered guitar walked through the gate. He was noticed only by the robot watchman.

"Sir," rasped the robot, "are you the parent or guardian of any of these children?"

Miklos blew a smoke ring at the robot. "No!"

"Peddlers, beggars, salesmen, roller skates, pets and children over twelve years of age are forbidden in the playground," said the robot.

"I am not a peddler, beggar, salesman, roller skate, bicycle, pet or child over twelve," said Miklos, who knew the routine.

"Are you a sexual deviate?" asked the robot. "Sexual deviates are prohibited from the playground by law, and may be forcibly removed."

"I am not a sexual deviate," said the man with the mustache. Predictably, the robot stood there for a moment, relays clicking confusedly, and then rolled away. Miklos entered the playground, threw away his half-smoked cigar, and sprawled himself on the last bench in front of the tri-D.

He strummed a few random chords on the guitar, and then sang a staccato song in Spanish. His voice was harsh, and his playing, at best, passable, but both were loud and enthusiastic, so the total effect was not unpleasing.

A few of the younger children detached themselves from the group around the tri-D and grouped themselves around Miklos' bench. He went through "Santa Anna," some very amateurish flamenco, and an old Israeli marching song. By the end of the marching song, all but the

oldest children had gathered around him. He spoke for the first time. "My name is Miklos. Now my friends, I will sing for you a very nice little song about a rather nasty fellow. It is called 'Sam Hall.'"

When he got to the part of the chorus which goes: "You're a buncha bastards all, damn your eyes," the robot came rolling over at top speed, screeching "Obscenity is forbidden in the playground. Forbidden. No child must say naughty words. No obscenity. Will the child who said the bad words please stop."

"I said the bad words, you pile of tin," laughed Miklos.

"Please stop using obscenity," croaked the robot. "Obscenity is forbidden to children."

Miklos lit a cigar and blew a huge puff of smoke at the robot. "I am not a child, you monstrosity. I can say what I please." He grinned at his appreciative audience.

Relays clicked frantically. "Are you a sexual deviate? Are you a beggar, salesman or peddler? Are you a child over twelve?"

"We went through this already. I am none of those things. Get out of here, before I report you for interfering with the civil rights of an adult human."

More relays clicked frantically. There was a slight smell of burning insulation. The robot wheeled off, careening crazily. It stopped about

a hundred yards away, and began to mumble to itself.

Miklos laughed, and the children, all of whom were now clustered about him, roared with him.

"And now, my friends," he said, "let us talk of better things: Of pirates and khans and indians. Of the thousand and three white elephants of the King of Siam. Of the Seven Cities of Gold, and the great Caliph Haroun-al-Rashid."

"Have you been to all those, mister?"

"Are you a pirate?"

"What's a caliph?"

Miklos spread his large hands. "Wait, wait, one at a time." He smiled. "No, I am not a pirate. I am a Romany."

"What's a Ro . . . ?"

"Romany! A gypsy, my young friend. Not so long ago, there were thousands of us, rolling all over the world in bright red and yellow wagons, singing and playing and stealing chickens. Now I am the only one left, but I know all the stories, I know all the places—"

"You ever steal a chicken, mister?"

"Well . . . No, but I've stowed away on planes, even on a ship once. Do you know what that would have meant in the days of the pirates? Sir Henry Morgan would have made me walk the plank!"

"Walk the . . . plank?"

"Yes, he would've stroked his

dirty black beard, and said: 'Miklos, ye scurvy bilge-rat, ye'll jump into the drink, and be ate by the sharks, or I'll run ye through with me cutlass!'"

"Couldn't you call a cop?"

Miklos grimaced and twirled the ends of his mustache. "A cop! Sir Henry would've ate one of your cops for breakfast. And at that, he'd be getting off easy. You know what Haroun-al-Rashid would've done? He'd have his Grand Vizier turn him into a camel!"

An older boy snickered loudly. "Aw, come on, ya can't turn a cop into a camel."

"I can't, and you can't, and maybe nobody today can. But in those days, in Baghdad! Why, anyone could!"

Most of the older children wandered away, but a hard core of six- and seven- and eight-year-olds remained.

"You must believe," said Miklos, "and then you can do these things. Fifty years ago, you could cross the world with your thumb. Now they say it's impossible. But, my little friends, I know better. I have done it. How? Because I am a Romany. I believe, even if they say I'm crazy."

"Wow mister, Romanies is smart, huh?"

"No smarter than you. In fact, you can only do these things if you're a little stupid. Stupid enough to believe that somewhere, sometime, there still is a Baghdad,

and Samarkand is still Far. You must be stupid enough not to care when the police and the Chairmen of the Board say you're crazy. And if you believe hard enough, and are crazy enough. . ."

"What, mister?"

The man with the waxed black mustache sighed, and then he leaned close to the circle of small heads and whispered: "If you believe hard enough, and care long enough, and are crazy enough, and become nice and wicked, then some day you will get to the Spanish Main, and the Seven Cities of gold, and the magic city of Baghdad, where there are no robots or schools, only magicians and wild black horses. And some day, you will see Far Samarkand, shining white and gold and red above the sands of the desert. And, little friends, if you are especially dirty, and never, never wash behind your ears, and only brush your teeth once a day, and don't watch the tri-D, and say four bad words a day for a month, and dream always of the lost far magic places, some day you will wake up, early on a cool autumn morning, and you will be a Romany!"

Miklos picked up the guitar. "And now, my little Romany, we will sing."

And he played the old songs, and sang of the far places until the sweat dripped onto his mustache. Then he pulled out a red ban-

danna, wiped his face, and played some more.

For two hours, he played and sang, and told the old tales.

He was just finishing the story of Atlantis, when the cop arrived. The cop was dressed in the usual blue tunic and shorts, and the usual scowl. "What the hell's going on here?" he said.

The robot came wheeling over, moaning, "Obscenity is forbidden in the playground. Obscenity is—"

"Shaddap!" said the cop.

The robot shut up.

"All right, bud," said the cop, "what do you think you're doing?"

"Just singing a few songs, and telling a few stories," said the man with the waxed mustache meekly.

"You're disturbing a public playground," said the cop. "I think I'll run you in."

A little sparkle returned to the man with the mustache. "Is that a crime, officer?" he said.

"No, but . . ."

Miklos chewed on his cigar. "Then I guess you'll be on your way," he said.

"Not so fast," said the cop. "I can still run you in for vagrancy."

The man with the mustache grinned, and then permitted himself a large laugh. "I'm afraid not, my friend. No indeed, I'm afraid not." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of wet, soiled bills. He counted out two hundred dollars, and shoved them under the

cop's nose. "See, my friend? I am hardly a vagrant. Well, my little friends," he said, turning his back to the cop, "I must be going, before there is any more trouble, and I am tempted to turn this worthy officer of the law into a you-know-what. Good-by, my friends. Remember the Romany."

The children grinned. The cop stood there. The man with the waxed black mustache hoisted his guitar to his shoulder, and slowly walked out of the playground, whistling loudly.

The early morning sun shone in through the large picture window, bathing the bar in bright yellow light. The bar was empty, except for the bartender and a young man with a detached, faraway look. The young man, who was wearing the gold and black uniform of the Space Corps, sat at one end of the bar staring out the window and sipping a beer.

Miklos stepped in, the open door admitting a blast of hot air into the air-conditioned room. "Hello, my friend," he said, sitting down two seats away from the young Spaceman. "A beer, please."

The bartender pressed beer, and the plastic stein appeared in front of Miklos. Miklos took a long drink. "The morning is the best time for a good cold beer," he said. "Too bad so few people recognize its beauties." He glanced

at the young man. The Spaceman gave Miklos a funny look, but not one of distaste. He said nothing, and continued to stare out the window.

"Did you find the playground?" asked the bartender. The Spaceman smiled a twisted smile.

"Of course," said Miklos, lighting a cigar. "No trouble at all. That is, except for a cop that tried to chase me away. But he was little trouble." He pointed to his head. "Not too bright, you know."

The Spaceman chuckled softly.

"You still haven't told me what you did there," said the bartender.

The man with the mustache thumped his guitar. "I played this thing, I sang, I told the kids a few stories."

"What for," asked the bartender.

The young man got up, and sat down next to Miklos. "I know what for, don't I?" he said, smiling.

Miklos laughed. "If you say you do."

"Say," said the bartender, "You're a Spaceman. You been around, no?"

"I suppose I have."

"Well then," said the bartender, "maybe you can help our guitar friend here. He's looking for something."

"Oh?" said the young man with the faraway stare. He seemed to be suppressing something between a snicker and a grin.

"Yeah," said the bartender, laughing, "Gypsies!"

The Spaceman did not laugh. He ignored the bartender, and turned to Miklos. "You are looking for Gypsies?"

"Yes," said Miklos soberly. "Yes, I am looking for Gypsies."

"For the Romany?"

Miklos stared hard at him. "Yes, the Romany."

The Spaceman drank the last of his beer. "It is a hard thing," he said, "to find Romany these days."

"I know, I know," said Miklos, resting his head in his hands. "For fourteen years I have looked. Fourteen years, six continents, and God knows how many countries. It's a long time — a long sweaty time. Perhaps too long, perhaps I am crazy, and there are no more Romany, and perhaps there never will be. Perhaps I should give up, and go back to being a vice president in charge of sales, or go to a psychiatrist, or —"

"I know a place," said the young man.

"A place?"

"A far place," said the Spaceman. "A place that no one has yet seen. Alpha Centauri. Or perhaps Sirius. Or Rigel."

"The stars?" said Miklos. "Nobody's ever been to the stars."

"Indeed," said the young man, smiling, "no one has ever been to the stars. What better place to find the Romany? Out there, in a land

that is not yet in the travel tours, a land that no one has ever seen, the kind of land where the Romany have always gone. Somewhere out there, there are cities that put all the legends to shame. And magic, and wonder . . . The Universe has a billion worlds. Surely, on one of them there are Gypsies, on another Khans, on another ancient Baghdad."

"A very pleasant picture," said Miklos, lighting a cigar, "and probably true. But unfortunately, it's as possible to go to those worlds as it is to visit ancient Baghdad."

"Not quite," said the Space-man. "On the Moon, they are building a faster-than-light starship. First stop Alpha Centauri. There will be others. Many others."

Miklos stood up. "A starship! Yes! I'll book passage right away. You wouldn't think it, to look at me, but I'm moderately rich." He stared out the window at the sky. "Perhaps I'll find them yet, out there."

"Of course," said the young man, "it's a government project, like the Moon, and Mars and Venus. As they say, there's only room for 'trained experts.'"

"Of course," said Miklos, "of course . . . it's always that way. Always machines, or men like machines, always. But no matter! If those ships exist, there is a way on them. If the stars are there, there's

a way to bum your way. If the Romany exist, some day, somewhere, I'll find them." He stood up, and slung his guitar over his shoulder. "I'm off for Canaveral," he said. "And then to the Moon, and then . . . Well, good-bye and thanks."

The man with the waxed black mustache stroke out into the sunny street.

"Thanks, pal," said the bartender. "You really got rid of that screwball. He was starting to worry me. You really knew what made him tick."

"I ought to," said the Space-man.

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Well, once there was a kid in Springfield, Ohio, in fact the kid was me. And this kid was like all the other kids in this world, a nice packaged future member of a nice, packaged society. And then one day, maybe eleven years ago, a crazy guy with a mustache blew into town, and told that kid a lot of tall tales about a lot of far places. Something changed in that kid that day — a very small change. But it got bigger and bigger every year, until now that little change is the whole person. And here I am, on my way to Centaurus."

"You mean there really is a starship?"

"There sure is, and you know something? Somehow, some day, in some highly illegal manner, that

guy is going to get on it." The Spaceman looked out the window as if he were already on his way to Centaurus.

"What'll they do to him when they find him?" asked the bartender.

The Spaceman looked at him, a strange softness in his eyes.

"Only a certain rare kind of man can go somewhere no one's ever seen. You can't package that kind of man. You can't grow him in controlled schools and mold him

on canned dreams. You've got to beat him and kick him and laugh at him and call him crazy. And if someone has whispered certain things in his ear at a critical time, you have a man who will go to the stars."

The young man glared at the bartender.

"What will we say to him, when we find him on the ship? What else, but 'Welcome, Miklos. Welcome home.'"

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Film



Craig Gardner

Now, About Star Wars

What? You haven't seen *Star Wars*? (A purely hypothetical question. It is perfectly possible — however unlikely — that someone out there is still resisting the *Star Wars* phenomenon.)

Go out and see it.

What's that? Waiting for dollar night? You fool, you! Especially if you live in one of those Specially Selected Communities showing *Star Wars* on a big screen with the incredible Dolby sound system. The sound mix on the Dolby prints actually localizes the sound "where" it occurs, either on or off screen. The most dramatic example: Early in the film, the nasties land on the good guys' space ship. Someone yells, "They're on the roof!" or some such. And the audience hears the clanking of metal on metal *above their heads!*

It's a nice little touch, only one of many nice details that sparkle throughout the movie. Director George Lucas pays attention to the minutiae within the film, as well as to the grander scale of the story. It's this total technical vision which makes the film a success.

Lucas calls *Star Wars* a "space fantasy" (rather than science fiction). It's essentially an adventure film, like the Errol Flynn *Adventures of Robin Hood*, except the character parts are filled by robots and furry-faced aliens rather than Alan Hale and Allen Jenkins. *Star Wars* invites many such cinematic comparisons. Lucas knows his movies, and he has used the history of film as his cinematic building blocks. Swashbucklers and samurai films can be seen in the lightsword fight; the pilots' preparations for the final battle owes a lot to Howard Hawks' *Air Force*; and the final scene looks a bit like *Triumph of the Will*. Even the dialogue contains references to other films, including, at the beginning of the cellblock-escape sequence, a play on the title of Lucas's own early science fiction film, *THX-1138*.

But Lucas' vision is solid, and all these bits and pieces *work*, making *Star Wars* a well-done entertainment.

Ah, but *Star Wars* is more than just a film. It is a box office hit. In fact, it's such a smash that it may even surpass *Jaws* as a money-maker. Let's face it, gang, *Star Wars* is a phenomenon. Stills from the film grace the covers of almost as many magazines as does Farrah Fawcett-Majors. *Star Wars* posters, records, Wookiee dolls, and Darth Vader masks are heavily merchandised. Certain critics seize

the opportunity to wheel out their wheezing prejudices on the field of science fiction in general, trying to make dubious — and negative — connections between sf and *Star Wars*. But, most of all, *Star Wars* get written about, and written about, and written about. . . .

Reactions to the movie vary, from the rapturous review in *TIME* and the enthusiastic response from most sf fans (who consider it the greatest thing ever committed to film), to the disappointment of critics in publications ranging from *NEW TIMES* to *CINEFANTASTIQUE*. These critics are unhappy with the film's emotional vacuity and lack of depth.

And they're right. *Star Wars* is beautiful to look at, but it's all on the surface. It's fitted with the trappings of a plot: evil tyrants versus the noble underdog rebels. But we are *told* who's what, and never really shown what makes either group tick. Even the underlying concept is a little thin. Apparently, the rebels want to overthrow the tyrants in order to set up a benevolent despot (from Princess Leia's family) in their place! Not all that inspirational, as causes go.

Of course, Lucas' cinematic expertise keeps us from asking questions (or from even caring about them, for the most part) during the course of the film. However, Lucas has announced

that *Star Wars* is only the first of a series of films set in the same "space fantasy" setting. An indefinite number of sequels are planned, to be put together by Lucas' associates.

I said I enjoyed the movie. So why aren't I overjoyed when offered more of the same? One simple reason: Lucas' involvement with the projects (the depth of which makes *Star Wars* work) will, of necessity, become farther and farther removed as each new sequel is produced. It's easy to imagine that the resulting films will become less and less inspired.

So, we come to the point in this contradictory assessment where we have a film/phenomenon which some claim to rank among the greatest imaginative movies ever made, while other classify it as a major disappointment.

Both groups, as I've indicated, have ample justification for their views.

More contradiction? Not in my mind, and if you stay with me through the rather lengthy digression that follows you should see my point.

The Digression — or, "Toward a Criticism of the Science Fiction Film":

I've already mentioned the influence of the Japanese Samurai film on *Star Wars*. I find the form useful in relating *Star Wars* to imaginative films in general, and to what I'll call the "science fiction

pantheon" in particular.

The Japanese like to categorize their films into very distinct genres, and actually separate what we call the Samurai film into two distinct forms, the "jidai-geki" and the "chambara." Both film types take place in the Japanese past, when the Samurai warrior caste was a major force in a feudal society. These films generally present a strong hero and a clear-cut struggle featuring many sword-fights and even more blood.

Here, however, the resemblance ends. The chambara is described by Joan Mellen in her book *The Waves at Genji's Door* as "unabashedly escapist entertainments. They do not pursue meaning and virtually concede their vacuity."² Pure action melodrama, the chambara set up a plain good vs. evil (or noble feudal sentiment vs. anti-feudal behavior) dichotomy. And the "good" always wins — sort of like Hopalong Cassidy.

All the Samurai films that are well-known and critically acclaimed in the U.S., however, are "jidai-geki." According to Ms. Mellen, the jidai-geki "poses the question of what we should believe and how we should live."³ The jidai-geki go beyond conflict for conflict's sake. They show man fighting society, man fighting tradition, even man fighting himself. At their best, they show a piece of the universal; what it is to be human.⁴

Very interesting, Gardner, but what's it all leading up to? Just this. I find the chambara/jidai-geki dichotomy transfers quite nicely to science fiction films, including *Star Wars*. After all, any fiction is generally set in the non-present for one of two reasons: (a) to escape the realities of the present, or (b) to comment on the present from a distance.

Science fiction films, while often combining elements of both forms, usually emerge as either "chambara" or "jidai-geki." Thus *2001* speculates on forces beyond humanity and the future of humankind. It is jidai-geki. *A Boy And His Dog* postulates a future that comments satirically on the present. It is jidai-geki, as are *Metropolis*, *Things to Come*, *Forbidden Planet*, and Lucas' own *THX-1138*.

And chambara? "Flash Gordon" serials, *The Amazing Colossal Man*, *Fantastic Voyage*, *Rollerball*, *Logan's Run*. And, of course, *Star Wars*. It may be the best chambara/sf film ever made, but it still falls short of the heights, and meaning, possible with the jidai-geki/sf film.

End of digression.

There. Everything clear?

In the final analysis, *Star Wars* is an achievement, not so much to be emulated as surpassed.

* * * * *

The Disjointed Voyage of Sinbad

Spring also saw the release of *Sinbad and The Eye of the Tiger*, another film animated by Ray Harryhausen. The operative word here is "another." Harryhausen's recent films seem to be degenerating into a procession of stop-motion animated marvels without much substance to the interconnecting material. Unfortunately, neither the marvels nor the surrounding material in *Eye of the Tiger* come close to that of Harryhausen's best work.

Sinbad is played this time by Patrick (son of John) Wayne, who looks great in the part as long as he doesn't open his mouth. His prime adversary is an evil sorceress, played by Margaret Whiting, who interprets the part rather like a venomous Greta Garbo, which is fun for a while but isn't enough to sustain the film. And that is *Eye of the Tiger's* trouble. There is nothing in the movie's plot to consistently grab the viewer. It moves forward, but only on an incident-by-incident basis. There is very little cause-and-effect; because of this, the mechanics of the film are all too visible, like a skeleton whose bones are either not connected, or are put in backwards, or are in the wrong place altogether. For example: The villainess is given the foot of a seagull at one point in the story, for shock value alone. It

doesn't affect the further development of the plot in any way. At another point, a bronze Minotaur, an awesome beast that the audience expects to see involved in a fight with Sinbad, is merely tossed aside when a stone falls on top of it. Pffaggh.

The movie does have its nice moments. Unlike Carol Munro in the last Sinbad outing, who was around mostly to scream, faint, and wear scanty costumes, the female leads here — including Taryn (daughter of Tyrone) Power — actually get to act more or less like intelligent human beings. There are some good bits of off-beat humor here and there, such as when a wizard searches through his incredibly disorganized workroom, looking for a fragile, ancient scroll containing priceless knowledge, only to find it buried in some hamster litter. And Harryhausen's special effects, while occasionally misdirected (the fight against the giant walrus looks just plain silly) and even sloppy in a place or two, are frequently brilliant. Especially nice is the final troglodyte and sabertoothed tiger fight scene.

The painful shortcomings of a film like *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* become even more apparent when compared with the professionalism and total vision of *Star Wars*. Hopefully, the success of the latter will allow Harryhausen more artistic freedom on future projects.

Beyond the Boob Tube

Fantastic Television, by Gary Gerani with Paul H. Schulman (Harmony Books, N.Y., 192 pp., \$5.95) is one nifty book. Mr. Gerani seems to have spent even more hours in front of the tube than I — no mean feat, I assure you — and the resulting compendium brings back waves of nostalgia for those long, wasted hours looking at that talking box. Gerani lists just about all the major sf, fantasy and horror tv shows in depth, giving a brief overview of each series and an index of episodes, including writers, guest stars, and plot summaries. He then goes on to list all American and British television series and made-for-tv movies containing fantastic elements. His style is quick and bright, and his critical perceptions are generally quite good (which means they agree with mine), although he does occasionally err on the side of kindness, especially when talking about the boring *One Step Beyond*. Overall, though, very well done.

I kept going through the text, looking for the mistakes and lapses that almost inevitably creep into this sort of work. As of this writing, I've found only three, quite good for a book of this scope.

Jet Jackson, Flying Commando, was not just, as Gerani states, "in some precincts . . . known as Captain Midnight." The program was

originally broadcast as *Captain Midnight* (who was always urging us boys and girls to "Drink our Ovaltine!"), and then re-edited for syndication with the new name. "Oh no, it's Jet Jackson!" the criminals would say on the soundtrack, but their mouths would form the words "Captain Midnight!"

Also, when Gerani talks about ABC's *The New People*, he neglects to mention that the show was created by Rod Serling, a serious lapse when you consider the attention Serling is given elsewhere in the book.

Finally, I'm sorry that, while Gerani talks about fantastic elements on children's television, he only discusses complete shows, and not those where only one segment contained fantastic elements. I particularly miss mention of some personal favorites: Mr. Peabody and his boy, Sherman, along with their Way Back Machine, and Super (You knew the job was dangerous when you took it, Fred!) Chicken. Ah, those old Jay Ward cartoons. And, of course, there's the early Hanna-Barbera *Ruff and Reddy*, with its initial series in which our heroes fight robots from Muni Mula (which is aluminum spelled backwards). And what about Terrytoon's *Tom Terrific*, which appeared as part of the early *Captain Kangaroo*? I could go on indefinitely, but I suppose you have to draw the line somewhere.

A much more serious omission on Gerani's part is *Beany and Cecil*, which was a regular half-hour animated (more or less) series featuring a sea-serpent.

Gerani also has two general lapses in the book which I find more annoying than any of the nit-picks above. The first is his continually referring to sf as "sci-fi." Ugh. The second, more serious, is that Gerani treats the fantastic on television as if it existed in limbo. TV adaptations of works like "The Little Black Bag," "To Serve Man," and "The Girl With The Hungry Eyes" are only credited to the screenwriter, without any mention of the story from which the screenplay came. This attitude prevents *Fantastic Television* from being the comprehensive reference work it might have been.

* * * * *

Notes

¹"Jidai-geki?" the alert *Star Wars* freak muses. Jedai knights? Hmm. Could be.

²Joan Mellen, *The Waves at Genji's Door: Japan through Its Cinema*, Pantheon/Asia Library, N.Y., 1976, \$7.95. P. 113.

³*Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴Notable examples of jidai-geki include *The Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo*, and *Hara Kiri*. Typical chambara films include movies like *The Shadow Hunters*, *Trail of Blood*, and all the Zatoichi epics.

What do you get when you mix mysterious women, desperate hit men, and murky motives, with a detective who just wants a vacation?



Being on vacation, I'd decided to go to the track and play the steeds. Unfamiliar with low-gravity racing, I bet on mounts with catchy names. Fifty clams and a steed named Tickle Tuna later, I headed for the bar.

The bartender was an Earthman, but the drinks he mixed were inhuman. By the third, my eyeballs were beginning to float, and it was then that the dame walked over to my booth. She had a mane of long, blonde hair, and long, willowy legs. Being a native, she also had long, three-jointed arms to match, and a set of compound eyes. "Mind if I sit down?" she asked.

She looked like a nice kid, although, like all Columbi

FILM *by Chris Dornan* NOIR

natives, a little too spindly for my tastes. I offered her a chair.

"You're Sam Fielding?" she asked.

"No," I corrected. "I'm On Vacation."

She obviously knew who I was, and paid no attention.

"You're a private dick?" she said.

I thought, for a moment, that she was being obscene. "What?" I said.

"A gumshoe."

"Huh?" I must have looked bewildered. She elaborated.

"An eye. A hired arm. A private investigator."

The last one I understood. "Oh," I said, recognition spreading across my face. "Yeah. What's it to you?"

She seemed determined to direct the course of the conversation. "What's a mercenary detective like you doing on a planet like Columni?" she asked.

"Because," I said, "everyone knows there's no crime here. What better place for a vacation?"

She leaned towards me across the table. "You know why there's no crime on Columni?" My reflection was kaleidoscopic in those compound eyes.

"It hadn't crossed my mind," I answered.

"Because Columni is a vacation planet," she informed me. "Every incoming tourist is screened, and their mind profile is stored in the capital. With that data, the probability factors for crime are calculated, and the Aversion Police ensure that the predicted crime never occurs."

"The Aversion Police?"

"They avert crime," she explained.

"So?" I said.

Her head pivoted, glancing for eavesdroppers. "So, the probability factor for murder has jumped to thirty-seven per cent in the past two days."

I tried to look suitably impressed. "Whoopee," I said. "Why tell me?"

"Because I have reason to be-

lieve that I'm the one who's going to be murdered. I need your help."

I started to tell her that I was on vacation when she shoved what she called a retainer at me. It looked like a healthy percentage of the gross planetary product. "This is a lot of money," I said, needlessly. "What's the idea?"

She stood up suddenly, "I'll contact you," she said, and bounced swiftly and effortlessly out of the bar.

I stayed for another drink, then, since it was getting late, hailed a cruiser for my hotel.

My room was dark when I entered, and I had trouble finding the light switch. You know how clothes piled on a chair can assume grotesque, misshapen forms in the twilight of a partially illuminated room? I could have sworn there were two six-meter gargoyles standing over by the window before I realized that they were only shadows.

I flicked on the lights.

There were two six-meter gargoyles standing by the window; two great hulking beasts with leather skin and bat-like wings, trying, not very expertly, to hide behind the curtains. Their knuckles seemed to drag on the carpet and their huge, ominous bodies were complemented by small, ugly heads that housed smaller, uglier brains. They wore nothing but jockstraps.

I recognized them immediately.

They were Gorgons: genetic constructs used for playing professional football on high-gravity planets. Something told me they weren't here to play ball.

"Good evening, gentlemen," I said. "What can I do for you?"

They ambled out from behind the curtains, obviously having difficulty staying on the ground in Columni's low gravity, and the smaller one peered at me from underneath his eyebrow ridges. He stuck his hand out, and I examined the one-inch retractible claws at the ends of his calloused fingers.

"Matt Jeffrey," he said, introducing himself. "I'm in plastics."

I refused to believe him, especially when the larger one shuffled over, gripped me by the shoulders, and said "Axe Bronco. I'm in cement. Know what I mean?" A grin spread across what I tentatively classified as his face, revealing rows of nicotine stained canines that would have shamed a saber-tooth.

My hand inched, instinctively, towards my shoulder-holster before I remembered that it wasn't there. That's another reason there's no crime on Columni: they take away your lasers at Customs and Immigration. Happily, the brute put me down.

"We're looking for a girl," the small one told me. "We thought maybe you'd be able to help us." He started to clean his claws with a half-meter piece of scrap iron that

came to a sharp point. I calculated that this was a gambit intended to perturb me.

"What girl?" I said, perturbed.

"Name's Felona Gymonpray."

"I don't know anyone by that name. Maybe you'd like to contact Missing Persons," I suggested, indicating the phone.

"An' maybe you'd like to wear your face backwards?" Axe suggested, indicating my face.

"Yeah," Jeffrey agreed. "I think you ought to tell us. That way you keep most of your vital organs in their proper locations."

"And I think the Professional Football Players Review Board would be interested to know what you boys do with your time during the off-season," I said. They drew back visibly, and those ugly smiles disappeared.

"Excuse us," Jeffrey apologized as they withdrew to the back of the room and became involved in a subdued, but heated, conversation, portions of which I overheard.

"Salamander didn't say nuthin' about the friggin' Review Board," Axe protested.

"Look, I want my options picked up too, but if we want to get paid, we finish the job."

"Yeah, money," Axe said, his mood brightening perceptibly.

Eventually their attention returned to me. "Okay," Jeffrey said, "you've won this round, Building."

"Fielding," I corrected.

"But the fight ain't over." They gathered their webbed wings about themselves and headed out the door.

It had been a hell of a day, and I decided to retire, first stashing the 'retainer' in the secret compartment in my suitcase (which the Customs official had discovered, but, to his disappointment, had found empty). Exhausted, I sat on the edge of the bed and started to take off my shirt when I noticed a small, black package on the floor by the curtains.

Picking it up, I realized that it was a perfectly ordinary allumette, that one might pick up in any restaurant or bar. I flicked the ignition and the flame appeared above the tiny nozzle. Above the flame, the allumette's advertisement spelled itself out in sparkling letters. "Drinks and dancing, Jay's Reactor. Entertainment nightly."

It was the oldest lead in the book: a suspect drops matches from a bar. It was almost as if someone was leading me there. . . .

Jay's Reactor was, according to the bartender, going critical. The crowd was young, frantic and jammed to the walls. I sat at the bar, wedged between two interesting-looking female quadrupeds of uncertain origin. The bartender maintained that it was always this hot, always this crowded, and never got quiet. Almost immediately after he told me this, a dis-

concerting hush fell over the place, and, like the Red Sea, the throng parted to allow a balding, obese, immaculately dressed man and his entourage pass through.

"Jay Salamander," the bartender told me. "He owns the joint. Likes Columbi because of the low gravity; less threat of heart disease."

I watched over the heads of the now-dancing crowd as Salamander and his companions left through a back door. I turned back just as the bartender was taking away my empty glass, revealing a note on the table. "The murder probability has jumped to fifty-seven per cent — Felona," it read.

Things were becoming more and more murky, and, as I stared at the note, I noticed a native signaling me from a table to my right.

"Hey, copper," she waved at me.

I found the expression incomprehensible. Assuming it was some type of code word, I attempted a counter-response.

"Aluminum," I called back.

She ignored my reply and persisted in her waving.

"Flatfoot," she said.

"Hunchback," I replied.

Finally, she got up and edged her way beside me. "Hi," she cooed. "I'm Plethora." She rested her triple-jointed arm on my leg.

"Sure you are," I said. She looked exactly like all the other female natives to me, except that she

had a mane of jet-black hair.

"You got a hotel room in the city?" she asked.

"Yeah, but you wouldn't like it. I share it with a couple of Gorgons."

"Sounds fascinating," she said, clicking her mandibles, the Columni equivalent of a seductive smile.

"Forget it, sister," I told her. "Our chromosomes don't match."

She removed her hand, and her voice took on a different, hauntingly familiar, tone. "You're smart, Sam," she said. "Maybe you're too smart for your own good. Maybe you know too much about film noir."

Film noir?

She stood up, and strode off into the crowd. Just as she disappeared, the two Gorgons materialized.

"Of all the gin-joints in the galaxy," the small one said, looking in the direction Plethora had just left, "she has to walk into this one."

"Huh?" I said.

"Nothin'," he replied. "Lemme buy you a drink." They positioned themselves on either side of me, and Jeffrey signaled the bartender.

"So how's the plastics business?" I asked.

"That was yesterday," he said. "Today I'm in retail wholesaling."

"I'm still in cement," Axe told me, smiling. "Know what I mean?"

I nodded.

The bartender placed our drinks, and Jeffrey sipped at his. "Find out anything about Felona Gymonpray for us?"

I knew it was going to be the wrong answer, but I said "Nope" anyway.

"Gee, that's a shame." Jeffrey turned to his companion. "Mr. Fielding seems to have a case of acute amnesia."

"Acute amnesia," Axe concurred, pausing over each syllable.

"He probably doesn't remember anything about film noir either."

I had to admit that I didn't, then swallowed most of my drink.

"Well, you'd better start to remember, 'cause Mr. Salamander wants to talk to you about it."

"Suppose I don't want to talk to Mr. Salamander?"

"I'm afraid," Jeffrey said, shaking his head, "that that's not an option."

The drink tasted ... peculiar. "What is this?" I asked, holding it up to the light.

"A Mickey Finn," Jeffrey told me.

I'd never heard of it. It occurred to me that there seemed to be a great many things I'd never heard of, just before the world got fuzzy.

"Out, out, brief candle," I heard Jeffrey say, and then the lights, indeed, went out.

I woke up in a small, dark room illuminated by a single light that someone had rudely pointed in my

eyes. I tried to raise my hands to shield my face from the glare, and it was then that I discovered my limbs didn't work.

"Good morning, Mr. Fielding," a voice said from the darkness, and a round, balding head made itself visible through a cloud of cigar smoke. "You haven't been very helpful," the head told me.

"What do you want, Salamander?" I managed to rasp through parched lips.

"You know what I want. I want you to tell me about Felona Gymonpray."

"Never heard of her."

He smiled. "Oh, really? My accomplices found this in your hotel room," he said, shoving a wad of bills in my face.

"I play Monopoly," I said.

"You're gonna play a game called Missing Anatomical Parts if you don't start answering questions," a gruff voice told me from the shadows, and I thought I could see the outlines of two seven-foot gargoyles in the darkness.

"Tell me about Felona Gymonpray," Salamander coaxed in a voice dripping with honey. "You know the murder probability has risen to sixty-nine per cent?"

I told him about the dame who had approached me in the bar at the track. He didn't believe me.

"I don't believe you," he said, and stood on my toe.

Fortunately, everything from my neck down was numb. Salamander

was not a slight man.

"Now I'm going to ask you another question, and if you answer incorrectly, Axe is going to staple your nostrils together." He paused, then demanded: "What do you know about American film noir?"

"Nothing."

Something large and leathery with fangs and wings moved towards me from the shadows.

"What would you like to know?" I corrected myself. I knew what two words of the phrase meant. America was an ancient Earth religion, and film was an obsolete two-dimensional medium. I'd seen it once, but it just looked like colors moving on the wall. But noir?

I thought that Salamander looked momentarily startled. "You really know about it?" he said.

"No. I'm bluffing," I admitted.

He moved behind me and breathed in my ear. "Well," he said, "that's regrettable. I'm going to have to think about what to do with you." He looked into the darkness at Axe, said "Babysit," indicating me, then left, followed by Jeffrey and someone I momentarily took for Gymonpray, then recognized as Plethora.

Axe and I had a stimulating conversation for a couple of hours. He maintained that there wasn't enough violence in professional football, so he had been taking

karate lessons. Apparently, he wanted to practice on me.

After a while, the feeling began to return to my legs, and I goaded Axe over towards me. "Your father was a hairdresser, and your mother smelled like figs," I said.

"Whadja say?" he said, rising and towering over me, hands on hips. If your mother had been a test tube and your father a burette, you'd be sensitive about your genealogy, too.

"You heard me," I said.

"Oh, yeah?" He moved closer and breathed in my face.

Gorgons wear those jockstraps for a reason. They have an exoskeleton that functions like a suit of armor, and it's very difficult to injure them, except in the testicles. But a jockstrap isn't much protection if you can curl your toes just right.

"Yeah!" I said, and jerked my leg up, curling my toes just right.

"Ouch!" Axe said, with considerable understatement, and curled to the floor in a fetal position.

I stood up, and discovered that the drug hadn't quite worn off. Shakily, I made my way to the door as quickly as possible. One doesn't dally after one has kicked a Gorgon. Just as I left, I heard Axe's voice, contorted by pain, tell me: "I'm gonna kill you, Fielding."

I made my way into the street and tried to hail a cruiser, without success. After five minutes, I

glanced behind me to see Axe running round a corner, foaming at the mouth and carrying what looked disturbingly like a sniping laser.

I rushed towards a robot police officer that was directing traffic about a hundred yards away.

"Someone's trying to kill me," I told it, breathless.

"Bullshit," it said.

I stared at it, incredulous. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Axe draw a bead on my head.

"There is no crime on Columbi," the robot told me. "There hasn't been a murder here for over a hundred years."

The laser blew away half of its midsection.

It looked down at the wreckage that used to be its drive unit, and said, "I believe an apology is in order," just before it crashed to the ground.

The cruiser came just in time.

I think what screwed things up was that I didn't go directly back to the hotel. Instead, I went by turbo to the Karl Fisher Rare Book Library, and looked up film noir.

All sorts of unfamiliar names passed across the reader: Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, who were detectives; Humphrey Bogart, Dick Powell, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James Cain and Sidney Greenstreet, who weren't.

It seemed that the plots of film noir concerned themselves with

protagonists whose goals were uncertain, whose motives were ambiguous, and who moved in murky, confused worlds where black-white morality blurred into a singular grey. Cynical and hard-bitten, they were buffeted by forces they didn't understand, and the more they learned, the more confusing the realities became. There was no right or wrong; there was only survival.

The plot sounded disconcertingly familiar, and I was beginning to suspect who was being set up as the fall guy on Columni.

I returned to the hotel about three hours later, only to find a message from Felona at the desk, dated at about the time I broke away from Axe. "The murder probability has jumped to ninety-four per cent," it read. "Get off the planet."

At this point, I decided in favor of the better part of valor. I got a robot chambermaid to open my room, to ensure that there was no one inside waiting for me. The room was empty, and exactly as I had left it, except that my suitcase was open on the floor.

It was just as I began to hastily pack that everything came into focus. I rushed out into the hall and grabbed the chambermaid. "Has this room been cleaned in the past twenty-four hours?"

The red "No" light blinked on, and I raced back into the room and sat myself in front of the door.

They only kept me waiting about ten minutes. The door slid open and Salamander, the two Gorgons and Plethora/Felona trooped in, looking very surprised to see me.

"That's right," I said. "I'm still here. The game's over."

Axe raised a gnarled hand and pointed it at me. "He kicked me in the —"

"I think perhaps we underestimated you, Mr. Fielding," Salamander conceded. "What tipped you off, as they say?"

"I did some reading about film noir, and noticed that I was being drawn into a plot that was remarkably similar to those I was reading about. Somebody was writing me into a scenario, somebody who knew my character so well that they knew what my actions and reactions would be. Who would know that?"

"Someone who had your mind profile," Salamander nodded.

"Exactly. And then there were other things. You managed to find the money without ripping the room apart. You simply opened the suitcase and took it out of the hidden compartment. Who knew about the compartment?"

Salamander smiled. "The authorities."

"And then Axe shot at me with a sniping laser. He could have hit me if he had wanted to, but he didn't. He just wanted to scare me."

"I should have shot you. You kicked me in the —"

"And who would be the only people who would have lasers on Columni, anyway? The Aversion Police."

Salamander sat down. "You're quite right. We are the Aversion Police. It's an interesting diversion for an overweight man who's confined to this planet for reasons of heart disease, and who gets bored by the nightclub business."

"But why me?"

"Just by virtue of your profession, the murder probability rose by seven percentage points when you arrived. The capital thought it advisable that you should be made to leave, so we designed this little vignette to convince you that you would be healthier elsewhere. But no prediction is perfect; we calculated that after you had kicked Axe —"

"*Right in the —*"

"— you would leave immediately. We didn't count on your trip to the library."

"So what now?"

He stood up. "Now, the game is

over. Enjoy your stay on Columni, Mr. Fielding." They moved towards the door.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What about the extra seven percentage points?"

"After the trouble we've caused you, Mr. Fielding, the Aversion Police will be glad to take special precautions to counteract them as long as you remain here. And now..."

He waved an arm, bandleader-fashion, in Axe's direction. The Gorgon began to hum a song I had never heard, in a tone that was slightly less raucous than thunder.

"Here's looking at *you*, kid," Salamander said, as he put an arm around Felona and all four walked slowly, in time with the humming, out the door. They were halfway down the hall when I heard Axe croak what must have been the only lyrics he knew: "...as time goes by."

I was starting to like Columni. Maybe it was the beginning of a beautiful vacation.

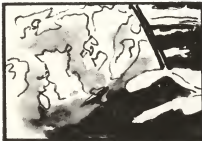
Random Motes

Featured speakers at the Harlan Ellison Roast, to be held in Boston on Wednesday, November 9, will include Alfred Bester, Edward L. Ferman, Norman Spinrad, and Roy Torgeson. For further details, contact the magazine.

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UNEARTH's editorial policy is as follows: We solicit and publish stories from writers who have not previously sold fiction to a professional SF magazine or anthology. We are not currently seeking film or book reviews.

Books



Tyler Matthews *John M. Landsberg* *Gordon Powers*

Astra and Flondrix, by Seamus Cullen. Pantheon Books, 286 pp., \$3.95.

Rolind of Meru, by Peter Lyle. Avon Books, 173 pp., \$1.50.

The Fiction of James Tiptree, Jr., by Gardner Dozois. Algol Press, 33 pp., \$2.50.

2076: The American Tricentennial, Edward Bryant, ed. Pyramid, 255 pp., \$1.95.

Closeup: New Worlds, Ben Bova and Trudy E. Bell, eds. St. Martin's Press, 222 pp., \$15.00.

What Is The World Made Of?, by Gerald Feinberg. Anchor Press/Doubleday, 290 pp., \$10.00.

Astra and Flondrix is a heroic fantasy with balls (among other things), and it's an entertaining, absorbing tale. It has all the elements one might expect from this kind of book — star-crossed lovers who must save the world, a doltish king, good and bad wizards, lovable elves, slaphappy dwarves, a disgusting witch — plus something extra that sets it apart from others of its kind.

That added something is, as indicated above, a liberal dose of anatomical drama. The actors in *Astra and Flondrix* urinate, defe-

cate, and commit almost every kind of sexual act imaginable, right there on stage. It gets to be a bit much at times — some of the acts are downright appalling — but, on the whole, it's delightful to see characters in a fantasy with their pants down.

Cullen tells his story with compassion and wit, and doesn't insult the reader with shoddy prose, plotting, or characterizations. *Astra and Flondrix* is not a great book (it is probably memorable, though), but it's a very good read. I suspect it will ultimately find its audience among eleven- to fifteen-year-olds, who will pass dog-eared copies among themselves at school. Buy a copy, read it through, and give it to the pubescent youngster on your gift list. He or she will be delighted.

Not so skilled a job of writing is Peter Lyle's *Rolind of Meru*. First of all, I have to admit that I didn't actually *read* this book, in the usual sense of the word. I dipped into it, taking as starting point the little excerpt in the front of the book:

"The chilling words of the crippled seer hung heavily upon Rolind's troubled soul. Adrift on the ocean of perpetual storms where even the sea-warrior Bintus sailed with great concern, did Rolind search for the enchanted flower that would free him from his accursed Li.

"Yet did he press onward,

more fearful of those who would not listen — his own father and brother among them — than the death that waited beyond every crashing wave of the sea, every swirling gust of the wind, every piercing look of the ship's crew.

"And then the flower lay upon his brother's chest...."

If you fail to notice anything wrong with this prose, you may as well skip the rest of this review — and don't ever speak to me again. If, however, you agree that this writing is simply atrocious, that it is absurdly mannered, florid, turgid, limp, and most of all *silly*, then you will understand why I had no desire to abandon myself to any more of Mr. Lyle's inane dribblings. (The author's name, by the way, is a pseudonym. Good move.)

Get a group of friends to go in with you on the purchase price of this one, and do what I did: go through it at random, stopping at each page you flip to. I guarantee you'll have to read no more than a few lines before choking on some particularly rank passage. And take your time: writing this bad should be savored.

The pros and cons of expensive, limited edition little booklets such as *The Fiction of James Tiptree, Jr.* have already been weighed elsewhere, so I won't go into them here. Considering the price and the size (see above), and the avail-

ability of the text elsewhere (Dozois' essay appeared as the introduction to the G. K. Hall edition of Tiptree's collection, *10,000 Light Years From Home*), this book would not have reached a wide audience, even had the print run not been limited to 1,000 copies.

And yet, and yet ... if you're a Tiptree fanatic, and you don't have the aforementioned G. K. Hall edition, you'll probably want to pick this one up. Dozois' essay is generally literate, informed, and perceptive, and he is wise enough to let Tiptree speak for herself on several occasions. (Her letters and articles are as crisply written and fascinating as her fiction.) Another bonus is the Tiptree-Raccoona Sheldon (the same person, we now know) bibliography. All in all, this will be a must-have for many Tiptree admirers.

Edward Bryant's Tricentennial anthology (original fiction and poems) is a disappointing effort, especially considering the editor's writing talents. It's not a total waste, by any means, but it could have been a great deal better.

There are some very nice stories here: Vonda McIntyre's "Aztecs," Patrick Henry Prentice's "Welcome to the Tricentennial," and Marge Piercy's "The Death of Sappho." But there are also several screamingly mediocre pieces, including a story by Robert E. Vardeman and Jeff Slaten that

would have been hoary thirty years ago, and a dreadful Harlan Ellison effort.

Worst of all, most of these stories don't have any feel whatsoever for the supposed matter at hand: what the country itself is all about, and what it means to live here. No matter what your feelings about the United States as a political and social entity, you must agree that it is a certifiable phenomenon, completely unique on this earth. Almost none of Bryant's writers even approached this fascinating, complex area of discussion, which is a shame. It would have added another dimension to the book, and would also have justified the book's reason for being.

Closeup: New Worlds is an utterly marvelous book, one that demands a place in everyone's collection. The idea behind it is a dandy: take six SF writers who are also scientists, and turn them loose to discuss the planets of the solar system according to their own interests and biases.

The results are just superb. Each chapter is well-written and engrossing (I especially enjoyed the Clement, Haldeman, and Stine sections); each combines a summarization of older knowledge and theories, current knowledge, and the author's speculations about his planet's nature. Even the scientifically illiterate (such as me) will be swept up in the excitement gen-

erated by the writing here. I found my sense of wonder stimulated more by this examination of known facts about our own star system than by most galaxy-spanning epics of fiction.

The last chapter is a lucid, absorbing discussion of the origins of the solar system, written by Ben Bova and Richard C. Hoagland. In addition, there are plenty of photos, including some lovely color plates. Time and new discoveries will probably conspire to make portions of this book obsolete fairly quickly, but don't let that stop you from buying it. It's a challenging, exhilarating experience that shouldn't be missed.

Flushed with my success at penetrating the mysteries of the void, I tried to stretch my luck by seeing if I could pierce the veil of mystery that shrouds modern physics. Not surprisingly, the veil remained impenetrable for me, but that is no reflection on Dr. Gerald Feinberg's worthy tome, *What Is The World Made Of?* His goal is to provide the layman with a non-mathematical explanation of what is going on beyond the range of the microscope, and he does it at least as well as could be expected. I can't imagine anyone producing a more accessible treatment of the quantum theory. Buy this book, get as much as you can from it. You won't find the subject presented this attractively again.

— Tyler Matthews

Brak the Barbarian, by John Jakes. Pocket Books, 173 pp., \$1.50.

The Best of John Jakes, by John Jakes. DAW Books, 252 pp., \$1.75.

"Wine spurted red as life at the courts," says John Jakes on page 33 of *Brak the Barbarian*, providing an example of the type of blundering observation that speaks poorly for the man's literary perception. The two Jakes books under discussion here contain many such nuggets. (What, for example, is a "bored sneer"?) I do not, however, want to write a detailed critique of Jake's non-mastery of writing techniques. Let it suffice to say that such a critique could be written.

Brak the Barbarian is derived from Conan, of course. Jakes apparently decided that the only thing that really counts in this sort of story, as long as you have the requisite hero, damsels, sorcerers, and quest, is some imaginative villainous magic. There is no really breathtaking sorcery here, but the various evildoers do make a respectable showing.

Must we settle for the Jakes approach? The Conan stories are overwritten, but the thickness of the language, the attention to evocative words and sounds, and the lush descriptions create a world, not a mere setting, and that may be more important than any other

aspect of a writer's approach to such stories. For those of you who simply can't get enough of this genre, go ahead and settle: it's not bad.

DAW Books is also trying to capitalize on the Jakes phenomenon: the cover of *The Best of John Jakes* bears a striking resemblance to those on the Bicentennial novels.

To talk about each story would be as pointless as the book itself. It is an insult to good writers that Jakes can have a book of his best stories published, when his best can't stand up to many writers' worst. His stories *are* efficient, solid, and readable, but they are also lumpy, unsubtle, and not remarkably imaginative.

In all fairness, if you buy this book, you probably won't be bored. Not only that, but there is one story in the book that, while not great, is a truly good story — "Here Is Thy Sting." It was written over a period of two years, utilizing advice from Joseph Elder and Damon Knight.

Perhaps a standard two-year rewrite and a couple of good editors are just what Jakes needs.

— John M. Landsberg

* * *

First Novel

Catchworld, by Chris Boyce. Doubleday, 244 pages, \$6.95.

The theme of sentient mechanisms superseding their instruc-

tions and threatening their masters is not a new one. However, it's still an interesting subject and, for the most part, Boyce handles it with a deft touch.

The novel is set in an unspecified future in which Earth has been decimated by an attack from across the galaxy. In retaliation The Condominium, Earth's governing body, constructs a star ship (18 years in the making) to search out and destroy the aliens' home planet. The ship is staffed by a human crew and guided by a machine intelligence (MI).

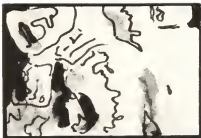
The bulk of the novel is taken up with the battle of man versus machine, as each fights for survival. Ultimately, the human element's personalities are absorbed into the circuitry, and their bodies are discarded as non-productive waste material. The result is the Overmind, a new entity which combines human ingenuity with mechanical calibrations.

Battle is joined between the star ship and an amorphous being known only as the Crow. During the course of the combat Boyce presents an impressive array of demons, visions, and hallucinations. As the inspired narrative arches and twists towards its conclusion, Boyce plays with the possibilities of the inner mind and the hidden regions of the subconscious.

Catchworld is a captivating story well told. — Gordon Powers

Science

Hal Clement



Science For Fiction #4

I said last issue that I regard Jupiter as the most likely place for life in the Solar system — not excluding Earth — and mentioned some of the reasons why Mars and Venus are no longer the ideal stamping grounds for fictional heroes. We don't have to go to other stars, however, to find more objects which might reasonably have their own biologies.

Even if we leave out the airless planets and moons, and pass off the gas giants as merely smaller editions of Jupiter, there is one body which may very well be a member of the club. This is Titan, seventh satellite of the gas giant Saturn.

I am not yet going really far out in designing life. I am assuming that the liquid phase is necessary, as I have been all along — after all, the biological machine needs moving parts. We are used to water, and science fiction fans of any standing are accustomed to ammonia as a possibility; but there are others. Combinations of water and ammonia can be liquid down to -100°C (about 170°K or -148°F). There is a so-called clathrate of water and methane whose phase diagram I haven't been able to find, but which at low pressures starts to break up around 100°K

into H_2O and CH_4 ; I suspect a high enough pressure would give it a liquid phase, though I'd appreciate some MIT reader's either finding me a reference or, if his thermo is up to it, borrowing some computer time and figuring the diagram for me. I suspect that mixtures of water, ammonia, and this material could be liquid at pretty low temperatures.

In other words, I strongly suspect there are liquids on Titan, but I'm leaving the careful checking to someone else.

Titan has been used, of course. Once upon a time Saturn was believed to be hot enough to act as a minor sun, keeping its satellites habitably warm. Back in the 1930's, Buck Rogers walked around on Titan (and on Saturn, for that matter) in his shirt sleeves. It annoyed me, even in my extreme youth, that the writers weren't taking real advantage of the facts which were known long before space probes.

Its orbit and rotation are old hat. The path is a nearly circular one about a million and a quarter kilometers from Saturn. Rotation is locked into this, so one hemisphere of the satellite always faces Saturn and the day — sunrise to sunrise — is just under sixteen of ours (15.945, if your story needs that kind of precision). The orbit is almost exactly in the ring plane, implying (a) you never get a very good view of the rings from Titan,

and (b) the satellite's equator is tipped about 26° to the plane of Saturn's orbit around the sun, so day length will vary with season and latitude about as it does on Earth. Whether at nine times our distance from the sun this fact has much climatic implication is something else.

At the north pole, the sun remains above the horizon for nearly fifteen Earth years at a stretch — and then, of course, below it for the same length of time.

Titan is about three times as far from Saturn as our moon is from us, but Saturn's real size would make it a pretty impressive object in the night sky (if the atmosphere is transparent — see below), even with the rings a mere edge-on sliver of light. Full Saturn would appear about a dozen times as wide as our full moon and, allowing for sun distance and difference in reflecting power, something like fifteen times as bright.

All this was background available to, if not usually used by, the AMAZING STORIES authors of the late 1920's. The actual environment on and near the satellite is another matter. Most of what we know has been picked up since 1970, and we can hope for another installment when Pioneer 11 gets to the Saturn system next year (suggestion for Suncon Art Show — a contest for the painting which comes out closest to what Pioneer

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sends back. I don't know whether the pass is slightly before or slightly after the Con, which would obviously influence the detailed arrangements, but there's time to think it over).

What the author needs are: atmospheric composition; gravity; physical and chemical nature of the surface (if any); temperature and, if there is flying or mountain climbing, the lapse rate; illumination; weather. There is still a lot of doubt about all of these, but some very interesting possibilities are now available.

Simplest is illumination. If the atmosphere is transparent, full daylight is about one eightieth Earth value (6+ stops, camera types) — perfectly adequate for the human eye.

Gravity is much more difficult. We have a reasonably good value for Titan's mass — about 1.92 times that of our own moon — but very shaky ones for its radius, the other value needed to calculate surface gravity. The body was taken as about 3,000 miles in diameter when I was a child first becoming an astronomy nut. Later for some years it was generally believed to be about 2,600. The most recently published results — 1974 and '75 — come out to 3,600, or not much smaller than Mars, though some astronomers feel that this value (obtained by timing the fadeout as the satellite was hidden by our moon) may include three or four

hundred miles of atmosphere. With the given mass, gravity at 1,800 miles from the center would be about two thirds that on our moon, or about a ninth that of Earth. If you move in to 1,500 miles it becomes 44% greater, so the size uncertainty means a lot. The same two guesses give densities, respectively, of 1.24 and 2.15 grams per cc, while the old 1,300 mile radius gives 3.3 on the same scale. The larger sizes put rather sharp restrictions on what the creature can be made of; with the largest size, it must be mostly ice and similar substances.

Our notions about the chemical composition tend to be largely influenced by current theories of Solar system origin. Ammonia hydrates and the methane-water clathrate mentioned above ($\text{CH}_4 \cdot 7\text{H}_2\text{O}$) are rather popular at the moment.

Methane was discovered in the atmosphere about 1944. At first it was believed to be very thin, and paintings dating from that era tend to show a dark-blue sky with Saturn clearly visible. Results in the '70's indicate much more methane, probably a comparable amount of hydrogen, and, for thermodynamic reasons, considerable amounts of spectroscopically undetectable material such as nitrogen or argon (with the former the chemical favorite — it could be produced by photodissociation of ammonia, which is a reasonable

substance in that part of the Solar system).

Polarization evidence indicates that there are clouds, apparently dark in color (reddish brown; oxides of nitrogen?) while the low ultra-violet reflectivity implies a more generally distributed haze. Hence, as suggested above, it may not be a very transparent atmosphere, and the surface could be even darker than that of Venus. There is ethane and possibly other hydrocarbons; there may be carbon-nitrogen-hydrogen materials such as ethylamine. A fair amount of ultra-violet light from the sun reaches Saturn's orbit, so photochemical products of all these materials — smog, in other words — may contribute to the haze. The surface could be partly or entirely covered by some of these products, though there is even more room for uncertainty here. Depending on internal temperatures, currently quite unobservable, the "ices" could be liquid almost or all the way to the surface. There could be an ocean of liquid methane over a denser one of ammonia hydrate. A methane surface would have to be below 100°K, while an unsaturated clathrate one could be up around 130-160°K (-240 to -210, roughly, Celsius).

The interesting point is that this environment, uncertain as it is, seems to run strongly to the reducing one supposed to be present on

Earth when life originated. The presence of somewhat heavier elements such as phosphorus for DNA is not demonstrated, but it's hard to believe they are totally absent if Titan condensed from the same general nebula as the rest of the Solar system.

So there is another adventure stage. Whether you like a surface of methane ocean or smog tars, whether you even make the reasonable supposition that traces of radioactive isotopes have provided internal heat, stirred up the bulk of the satellite, and given an even wider variety of substances at the surfaces — all this doesn't matter. It will be a while before we know, and all we can ask in science fiction is that you be reasonable. Have fun.

References for this column include another of the required-reading items for the space-opera writer: *Chemical Evolution of the Giant Planets*, edited by Cyril Ponnamperuma, published by Academic Press. Others, less high-brow, are in SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, the September 1975 issue (entirely devoted to the Solar system and its origin) and March 1974 (Chemistry of the Solar System).

That cleans up the likely places for life in this system. I'll either have to move outside for the next column, or design life forms which don't need a fluid phase. I should have my mind made up by Suncon.

1

Four people walked to the edge of the jungle. In two groups of two they crossed the last few meters of a wide clearing, a circular area as dead as the jungle was alive. By the shifting shadows at the clearing's edge they stopped and checked the weapons they carried; these were delicate, gleaming devices kept in crude holsters they had made themselves from the tough husks of some indigenous plants.

One of the group, a large, red-faced man, squeezed his weapon as if it had a life he could crush with the strength of his big hands. Nothing happened. "I hope they don't forget to turn them on once we're in the jungle," he said. "I'd hate to have those things catch us without any firepower."

None of the others answered him. Two of them busied themselves by emptying three woven sacks and arranging the contents in neat rows on the baked mud surface of the clearing. Only an occasional cough or the clink of metal broke the stillness.

The final member of the group stood alone in the stifling heat, staring at the wall of animate vegetation ahead. The man's hair was dark and flowing, and several of his teeth were broken, giving him an almost wild appearance. He was Captain Sean Callahan, commander of the C² ship, *Sophus Lie*. The others were the surviving members of his crew: techs Rachel Alyosha-Lermontov and Andrew

Downward to Darkness

by Timothy
Robert
Sullivan

Mead, and Executive Officer
Frederic Gruber.

It was Gruber who had spoken.

"It's all here," Rachel said. She
began to toss the odd implements
back into a sack, as did Mead and
Gruber with the two other sacks ly-
ing on the ground.

Mead, a thin and nervous black
man, twisted up the end of his sack
and said, "We better get moving,
Sean."

The Captain did not answer. He
wished that he could resist the
force that would make them go

into the jungle, but how could he?
He was no hero, and he knew it;
they would go on in a few minutes
whether he liked it or not.

It was hardly a jungle at all, it
seemed to the Captain, but a vision
of hell. Like damned souls, trees a
hundred meters tall twisted and
turned, vines creeping around their
quivering trunks with serpentine
stealth. Above, seed pods bal-

looned and burst, releasing their strange, powdery sperm to drift to the jungle floor. The whole thing writhed like a colony of giant green worms.

Rachel touched his wrist softly. "What's wrong, Sean?" she asked, setting down the sack.

Again, he did not answer. This time he *could* not answer. Rachel was inextricably involved in what was troubling him, and she knew it. Besides, he thought, she was just as aware of what was happening as he was, perhaps even more aware. Still, there was no reason to be petulant about it. He turned to look at her. She was a small, pale woman, her Slavic heritage evident only in the faintly oriental cast of her eyes. He sighed and reached down to scratch at an insect bite on his shin, just above the worn top of his boot, saying, "Let's not get into it right now." He owed her at least that much, he felt. At least a tacit promise to talk later.

"All right," she replied. Ordinarily, she would have tried to say something to lighten Sean's depression, but she was a bit hurt by his reticence. Still, she knew why he didn't want to say anything: he felt responsible for their nightmarish situation, and suffered from intense guilt over the deaths of the rest of the crew. Furthermore, he was too proud to share his problems with anyone, even a woman who loved him, and could not see that they were her

problems, as well as his own. In any case, she knew he did not want to talk in front of the others, if at all.

"I'll tell you what's wrong, even if he won't," Gruber said. "It's too goddamn hot — not even a breeze." He had a gift for understatement which did not escape the others. Though heat was not actually one of their immediate concerns, the constant broiling of the atmosphere was one of the many irritations that kept them at each other's throats — when they were not busy keeping each other alive. Among the dozens of daily annoyances they had to contend with were stinging branches that tore strips of skin from their bare legs, apparently to eat; hives that broke out on their flesh, a result of the bites of certain insects (they were reasonably sure); fungus that dripped from the coiling trees onto their unprotected scalps; and the sticky sweat and stink of their own filthy bodies. And these were the least of their worries.

"Well, Captain," Mead said, an edge on his voice, "what do you think? Buggers still in there?"

"Never mind the buggers," Gruber said. "Let's just get moving. We can discuss it on the way."

Sean ignored Gruber's comment. "Of course they're still in there, Andy." He wanted to tell Mead what he thought. He had learned from experience that

Mead, who had been the ship's Brightwork Technician, functioned best when he knew what to expect. "They aren't far away."

"Callahan," Gruber said, wiping perspiration from his brow with a meaty fist. "You've said that every time we've gone into the jungle. I say they won't bother us anymore." He glanced at Mead, as if for corroboration.

"Well . . ." Mead said, fidgeting uncomfortably. "We haven't seen one of 'em in quite a while. Maybe they learned their lesson." Mead's statement was an objective one, but it had been brought on by his resentment toward Sean for not answering him a few moments before. Ordinarily, he kept his mouth shut when officers talked.

Sean couldn't tell whether Mead was turning on him and favoring Gruber, or simply stating his opinion, but he did know the best way to handle Mead was through reason. "We can't assume that, Andy. We can't afford to," he said.

"Look," Gruber said. "Every time we've gone into this jungle we've been ready to fight. But the buggers never show. They aren't the only thing we have to worry about, you know."

"We could still run into them today," Sean said.

"I'll tell you what will happen today," Gruber replied, smiling unpleasantly. "We'll set up the mister, we'll watch the plants die, we'll pick up and start cutting our

way through this goddamn crawling mess of a jungle until we locate the center of another perimeter, where we'll start all over again. In all that time we'll never see any buggers, because they've learned to fear us."

"What makes you so sure?"

"What makes you so sure they're still game, for Christ's sake? We have every reason to believe we've seen the last of them." Gruber's voice had risen contentiously.

"I don't think they've ever been very far away from us," Sean replied, coolly accepting his Executive Officer's challenge. It would not do to get angry in front of the others, as Gruber hoped he would. "They just keep going deeper into the jungle as we destroy the foliage. What else can they do? This is their natural habitat, and we're ruining it. Sooner or later they'll have to turn around and face us."

"You sound like you believe they can think," Gruber's hairless face was set in a scowl.

"Some of their actions indicate intelligence," Sean said.

"He's right," Rachel said. "And he was right about them the first time, don't forget. You should listen to what he's saying." She wondered just how much of her trust in Sean's judgment was colored by her feeling toward him. What she was saying seemed rational enough, but she knew Gruber was

right about one thing: there were plenty of other dangers besides the buggers that Sean didn't seem to be thinking about. His insistence on constantly guarding against the arachnoids could conceivably lead them into something equally bad, or even worse. Still, she told herself, divisiveness could be the most terrible enemy of all.

"Sean still *is* the Captain, Gruber," Mead said.

Gruber spat. His attempts to antagonize Sean and enlist Mead had been unsuccessful. He was convinced it was only a matter of time before Mead and Alyosha-Lermontov saw that he should be in command, in spite of Callahan's rank. The trouble was, they might all be dead before they recognized this.

"You figure they'll have to stop running away from us then, right?" Mead asked, screwing up his dark, glistening features into a grimace. "You know, Gruber, you said you'd hate to have 'em catch you with no firepower. Sounds like you've been thinking the same thing Sean has, after all."

"Aaahh!" Gruber waved his powerful hand as if to dismiss him.

Mead turned and took a step toward Sean. "Sooner or later, you figure they'll have to turn around and face us, right? When they do we'll have to fight, won't we, Sean?" He had moved so close Sean could smell his stale breath.

"That's right, Andy," Sean

said. It seemed he had been wrong, suspecting Mead of siding with Gruber against him. Mead had only been speaking his mind, something Sean had always encouraged crewmembers to do on the ship. But things were a lot different now.

"We killed 'em before," Gruber said. "These wirepoints burned 'em away like they were nothing. His tone was grim as he brandished the frail looking weapon again. "Remember?"

"Yes. I remember," Sean replied. He also remembered the crewmembers who had died horribly in their sleep in the nights following the skirmish, the victims of fierce attacks that seemed somehow planned. The assaults were so swift and well-timed that they lost three people on three successive nights. God, how clearly he remembered waking to the screams of the dying in the alien darkness. After that they had been permitted to come out and sleep in the clearing where they were relatively safe, even though it slowed the project considerably. "I think they've been organizing," Sean said. "This time they might be ready for us. First they tried to get us one at a time, but we've prevented that. What they'll do now is attack in force."

"Do you really believe they can organize like that?" Rachel asked. "I know they show some signs of rudimentary intelligence, but isn't

the rest stretching it a bit?"

"I don't think so, Rachel. It's like a game of cat and mouse. They're playing with us, biding their time until they can finish us off with no danger to themselves. Fortunately, our friends back there gave us these wirepoints." He patted the holstered weapon at his side. "And they work . . . usually."

"I'd give anything to know how they turn these things on and off," Gruber said, still fondling his wirepoint burner. He had had it out ever since they halted at the jungle's edge, ostensibly to check it for any damage it might have incurred overnight. "If I knew how Javak operates these things, I'd go roast his ass. Then I'd come back here and hunt buggers."

"I don't think Javak's going to give you a lesson on operating wirepoints, Frederic," Sean said, slapping at a little leaping creature that passed in front of his face. He hoped that calling Gruber by his first name might ease the tension between them.

Gruber handled the slender alien weapon lovingly. He was very fond of it, and he had given it the descriptive name by which they all called it: the wirepoint burner. Absently, he turned his back on the others, as if he did not want them to see the pleasure it gave him.

Mead drew his wirepoint, too, cradling it in his dark, corded hands. "Have to make a new holster," he said, noting that the one

he had fashioned from a rubbery, cup-shaped plant was falling apart. "I don't want to lose this." He held the wirepoint up dramatically, so they could all see its gleaming curves and ridges, and its one-too-many finger grooves.

"No," Sean said. "You don't want to lose it." He reached down and picked up one of the sacks; it made a musical tinkling sound. "We'd better not wait any longer."

Gruber sheathed his wirepoint carefully and hoisted a fourth sack, a heavy bag of herbicide, slinging it over his brawny shoulder. "What do you call this stuff again?" he asked Rachel.

"Well," she said, stopping for a moment to explain, "it's something like isopropylamine salt, a common herbicide." Rachel, a biotech, could always be relied on for accuracy in such matters. When she made a statement it was usually correct; if she didn't know something, she never pretended she did. As she finished speaking she bent down to pick up one of the sacks filled with tools.

There was an unexpected metallic clatter. Rachel, Mead and Gruber all turned. They saw that Sean had dropped the sack of tools he was carrying.

"Oh God," Rachel said. "We waited too long."

Sean's head whipped to the right as though he had been struck in the jaw. Tears welled up from between his squeezed-shut eyelids. He

clenched his fists and trembled violently.

"I told you people five minutes ago, for Christ's sake!" Mead shouted. "Better get moving, I said, but everybody just stood around arguing instead. Jesus!"

Sean doubled over, oblivious to Mead's words. Each of his hands clutched spasmodically at the bicep on the opposing arm. His mouth hung open; moaning, he staggered toward the jungle blindly. The thalamic nuclei of his brain were a network of electricity — a hint of what was to come if they hesitated at the edge of the jungle any longer.

"Let's go," Mead said. His voice sounded unusually hoarse and high-pitched. "Come on, before they do it to us, too."

They followed the stricken Captain into the jungle, catching up to him quickly; he was leaning against a clump of violet stalks, breathing heavily. Above them, a seed pod swelled and silently exploded, its pollen floating down gracefully to settle on tattered clothing and shaggy heads.

"Did Javak cut off the prod yet?" Mead asked.

"Yes." Pollen fell like snow on Sean's long hair.

"Do you feel all right, Sean?" Rachel enclosed his fingers with her small hand.

"I think so."

"No matter how many times this happens we still wait too long,"

Rachel said. "Won't we ever learn?"

"That's right," Mead said. "We should have been half a kilometer into the jungle by now." There was concern in his tone, in spite of his admonitory words. With an index finger, he whisked a flake of pollen from his broad nose. "Why the hell *do* we always wait so long? We know we've got to move into this jungle every day — why make it worse?"

"Right," Sean replied, only half certain he knew what they were talking about; he was still a bit dazed from the effects of the force they had come to call the "prod." He was having mild hallucinations: Mead looked to him a cartoonish little figure, a face seen through a fish-eye lens. As the last traces of the pain diminished, however, he remembered what Mead was really like: a loyal, conscientious crewmember, and a very efficient tech, a man who had earned the respect of all on a number of occasions. Mead's slight figure and plain, honest features seemed less distorted as he recalled these things. Mead had also been his friend, and as such was always honest with him. If Mead disagreed with him when asked for an opinion, he got the truth, in spite of his rank. Sean felt the need to apologize to Mead for his suspicions about Mead siding with Gruber against him, but he remembered that he had never actually voiced that opinion. Or

had he? The constant strain, both physical and psychological, was getting to him. He was having trouble distinguishing reality amid the projections his mind was creating. By trying to take every possibility into consideration he had hoped to keep them all alive; instead, he was moving inexorably toward the edge of sanity, and was afraid he would soon be forced over, just as he had been forced into the jungle by the prod.

In the meantime, to keep him going, he had his responsibility toward the three remaining members of his crew. He straightened himself and took from Mead the sack he had dropped onto the baked mud of the clearing. Its contents were indispensable to the work that lay ahead of them.

"We've got a job to do whether we like it or not," he said. Taking a deep breath, he led the others into the creeping undergrowth; its green movement was enhanced by the flickering atmospheric light that reached even the lowest levels of the jungle.

Their progress was slow, and extremely cautious.

2

"Looks like a good place to plant the mister," Gruber said, pointing to a more or less bare patch of soil. He swung the sack of herbicide to the ground. "Let me have the tools," he said.

Mead glanced around nervously, then set down his sack and fumbled with the knot in its end. Untying it, he reached inside and withdrew a battered metal scoop, followed by a tubular object which had a point at one end and a funnel at the other. He handed them to Gruber.

"As usual, I do all the work," Gruber said. "You'd think I was the one who brought us here." He looked up at Sean as he scooped herbicide into the funnel.

"I told you I'd carry the herbicide if you got tired," Sean replied, trying to ignore Gruber's accusation. "I'll plant the seeder right now, if you don't want to do it."

Gruber snorted contemptuously. He continued his work, whistling a jaunty tune as he filled the mister with herbicide. Finishing, he raised it above his head with both hands and drove the point deep into the jungle floor. Then he stood back with the others while it drew moisture from the soil. Soon a fine spray rose from it, spreading a sickly blue miasma through the jungle. It was perfectly harmless to them, even though the trees slowly convulsed and ceased their movements altogether within moments. In a few hours they would wilt into vast piles of dead pulp, eventually liquefying and sinking into the ground, leaving nothing alive inside a huge radius: another circular clearing.

When he thought about what

they were doing, Sean felt a pang of guilt, even though they had no choice in the matter. He reflected on the possibilities for the use of the cleared land, but had insufficient knowledge of the alien society behind the project to come to any conclusions.

He watched as Gruber bent and began to efficiently scoop more isopropylamine salt into the mister. How strange, he thought, to see Gruber working like a machine to help those he hated. But Gruber had always been like that. The German was a good officer, always doing his work well, and he was all right aboard the ship, except for his predilection for arguments and angry, sometimes violent scenes. These were the only emotional displays Gruber ever allowed himself, as far as Sean knew. Otherwise, he was aloof and curt with everyone. Sean could never get past the man's gruff exterior, and that had disturbed him; as the Captain, he had tried to communicate with every member of the crew on a personal level, as well as an official one. But Gruber had always rebuffed his attempts at friendship. At first, Sean thought it was a personality conflict. Then he noticed Gruber acted the same way with everybody else. Furthermore, Gruber seemed to have it in for him because of his rank — an irrational resentment of authority. But how could Gruber have come as far as Executive Offi-

cer of a C² ship, reacting like that to his superiors? He finally decided that Gruber was not quite sane; there were many Starmen who had succumbed to the loneliness and desolation of a life forever separated from the era they were born in. It was best just to leave Gruber to his work.

The liquid fog stopped spewing from the mister. It would propagate in the moist air, killing plants by a process of mock nitrogen fixation. Instead of nutrients, the unfortunate trees would receive a lethal dose of defoliating poison. In a few days there would be nothing to mark their passing but an expansive circle of baked mud.

Gruber retrieved the mister and placed it, along with the scoop, into Mead's sack. Then he yanked the bag of herbicide off the ground and tossed it over his shoulder. As he pushed on into the jungle with the others he began to whistle the "Volga Boatman" in a funereal cadence.

They had to set up several more misters to complete the perimeter that was to be defoliated. That meant a difficult walk of several kilometers, much of it through dense and recalcitrant undergrowth. In their sacks were every conceivable kind of tool for hacking through the jungle, as well as several more misters. One was not enough, even though it could be used again; the reaction of the isopropylamine salt with whatever

was sucked out of the ground formed a crust inside it, freezing the mechanism. A mister could not be reused until it was cleaned thoroughly.

As they hacked their way through the jungle, something often passed overhead. Its gliding motion could be seen against the patches of auroral light that showed through the treetops. Its shape was oddly elusive: a skeletal thing, as far as they could determine, but they could never really make out any details. Some indigenous bird of prey? None of them knew anything about the animal life outside the jungle; there was no way for them to tell what it was. They referred to it as the "flying thing," for want of a more specific name. It had passed over them so many times that they never discussed it anymore. Whatever it was, it did not come down any closer, but always circled high above the trees. It was no danger to them, but they still watched it as it now flew over them.

"Don't move," Sean said as the others looked up at it. His tone was calm, yet firm. They stopped. Just ahead of them the ground quaked, swelling elastically into a meter-wide bubble. It burst, spraying a caustic liquid that would have burned the flesh off their bones, had they been too close. One member of the crew had already been lost that way.

"We better watch where we're

going," Mead said. "We were all looking up at the flying thing." Now he stared down, as they passed the hole in the ground where the bubble had exploded. Smoke curled around the spots where the splattering liquid had made contact, smelling incongruously pleasant, considering its deadly catalyst.

"That was a close one," Rachel said. She had analyzed the properties of the bubbles as best she could with no equipment. She thought the bubble used suction to force water up from aquifers, compounding it with one or more chemicals, which gave the liquid its vitriolic quality. The bubble's elasticity was apparently due to cells that were capable of interlocking in patterns that formed a flexible container of sorts. This container would eventually be overloaded with liquid and would burst, spewing forth its lethal contents, killing organic matter and dissolving it instantly, so that it soaked into the ground. Thus, the specialized cells were nourished, and soon regrouped into another container. A natural enough cycle — the only one Rachel could come up with, since she had no microscope with which to study the cell structure of the bubble's fragments.

At a safe distance from where the bubble had burst, they stopped for a rest. Sean picked a darkly shaded spot between the swaying trunks of two monstrous trees,

whose roots slithered through the dead material on the ground like ravenous worms. The trees seemed to Sean like the legs of some enormous misshapen dancer; he imagined that one of them could somehow free itself from the fastenings of its roots and crush him like an insect. At least that would be the end of it, he thought.

He sat down cross-legged in a spot where the light found its way down through the foliage. He was not really very tired, he reflected, not like he would have been on, say, Terra, after similar exertions. The lesser gravity here was easy enough to take.

In contrast to the gravity, the constant highs of temperature and humidity were intolerable. He stared upward at the source, the spectacular, flickering conflagration that somehow energized the planet. Squinting, he said, "How can anything live on a world without a sun?"

"What?" Rachel asked, peering upward to see what he was looking at. She was seated on the ground, in the lotus position. "What is it, Sean?"

"I was just breaking my own rule — thinking about the physical reality of this place, instead of just accepting things as they are."

"Don't you think we should try to understand how things work here?" Mead piped up.

"I don't think we *can* understand it," he replied.

"Why not?" Rachel asked. "Things seem to work systematically here, just like anywhere else. I think it's safe to think in conventional terms about a planet that's more or less spherical, has a thick crust, is apparently loaded with metals, has photosynthesis going on everywhere, and is, of course, oxygen-rich. The stars around here may be less compact, but I'm fairly sure they're composed of hydrogen and helium, too."

Sean was silent, thinking about when they had first seen the blobs of brilliantly glowing plasma that filled the local heavens. They had used the field surrounding the event horizon of Cygnus X-1 to hurl them, at the speed of light times itself, toward the galactic core. Theirs had been a plumb mission: to divert the incredible amounts of energy at the core of the Milky Way toward Sol, via tachyon flow. They had all stood to get rich from the flight. The credit accrued over such a lengthy period of time alone was staggering, not to mention all the other benefits such a historic flight had to offer. But something had gone wrong. The *Sophus Lie* was the first ship to make it to the galactic core, all right: they had ended up in the awesome black hole around which the Galaxy revolved. They had pulled through somehow: while the fabric of time and space heaved around them, they had passed safely through an asymp-

otic channel that took them through the naked singularity to—?

They didn't know. All they knew was that they found things something like suns. When they found some that gave off energy like a G-type star they checked for planets. The first few times they were disappointed, but eventually they found one with an Earth-type world. None of them had any doubt that they would spend the rest of their lives there.

They all boarded the cylindrical reconnaissance boat and went down to their new home. Two hundred meters over the jungle, they were snagged by a sinuous, looping thing that shot up from the foliage and forced them down. The boat was damaged beyond repair.

On their first foray outside the boat, one of the crew was killed. The rest were found by a group of sentient humanoids. They had been only too willing to go along with fellow intelligent beings.

But the humanoids were their captors, not their friends. They were put to work, defoliating the forest.

Now there were only four left.

"Let's get moving," Sean said. He wanted to take his mind off the past, but the present was just as bleak.

The others stood up, stretched, and picked up the sacks.

As he wrapped the knotted end of the sack around his wrist, Sean

had an apprehensive feeling. Something wasn't right. Anxiety — or a premonition? He saw a shadow flit quicksilver across the few patches of light on the ground.

"Buggers!" he shouted. Suddenly the things were everywhere. Ropy strands snaked from above as they descended, scuttling down on spiders' legs. Bulbous torsos heaved and flexed in the frenzy of the attack. They had caught the humans off guard.

Sean felt something land on his back. He struggled awkwardly, turning his head to look into eight glassy beads. Stiff mandibles groped for his flesh. From the midst of the thing's furiously churning legs rose a retractable protuberance, pointed and swollen with poison. *I'm dead*, he thought.

The bugger braced itself, biting Sean's trapezius muscle. It raised itself up on its legs to drive its deadly phallus into his spine.

Gruber lunged and batted it away.

Hardly able to believe he was still alive, Sean watched Gruber savagely pummel the thing to death. He felt as if he were in a nightmare, frozen while violence raged all around him, but he shook himself out of it and turned to join the battle.

Horried, he saw Mead's head covered with spindly black limbs, heard a piercing scream as a venomous spike was driven into the base of Mead's skull. Mead's

thin, dark body sagged to its knees as the bugger leaped from his head, revealing eyes rolled upward, little but the whites showing. The body keeled over. Instantly, dozens of black, loathsome things blanketed the corpse, screeching as they tore away hunks of flesh.

There was a liquid, popping sound as Rachel ground her heavy boot down on an abdomen as big as a football. She had caught one unaware as it scurried to join the feast.

Sean was relieved to see that she was still alive and holding her own.

Gruber rose from the remains of a bugger he had crushed with his bare hands. He drew his wirepoint and burned an arc across the jungle floor, sweeping the length of Mead's still kicking body. He smiled as three arachnoids crumpled and fell lifelessly from the remains.

"Sean!" Rachel screamed, her face contorted with fear.

Spinning on the balls of his feet, Sean narrowly avoided the leap of a particularly large bugger. He swatted it away. The thing landed on its back, its legs working frenetically. At his feet, next to the bugger, Sean saw one of the sacks, partially burned by Gruber's wirepoint fire so that the tools inside were exposed. He reached down and grabbed a mister; it was still hot. With both hands he raised it above his head and brought it down with all his strength, impal-

ing the monstrosity. He felt the clamminess of its vital fluids as the stuff welled up between his fingers.

From his crouching position, he saw Gruber crushing the creatures beneath his heels, burning them with his wirepoint, squashing them into horrid pulp. The burly man was a cyclone of violent motion, his long hair matted to his wet, red face.

Behind Gruber, Rachel angrily squeezed her sputtering wirepoint. It had failed on her completely; she shook it and flung it away in disgust.

Sean kicked a scrabbling bugger out of the way and ran to Mead's carcass. For a moment he hesitated; then, overcoming his revulsion, he reached down and darted his hand into the crawling black mass of buggers. Feeling the wirepoint still clutched in Mead's dead hand, he struggled to free it. A black thing crawled along the bridge his arm made from the corpse, toward his face. Knowing he wouldn't get a second chance to grab the wirepoint, he continued to try to pry it loose. But Mead's fingers gripped it tightly in spite of his efforts. Hairy black legs brushed his sweating face; suddenly he found himself breaking the fingers, snapping them back where they joined the hand. There was a loud cracking noise, and the weapon was free. The bugger was poised for the kill, stretched high on its hairy, black legs, its drip-

ping, tumescent member directly in line with his right eye. Fearing he would drop it, Sean nevertheless transferred the weapon over the bugger to his left hand and shoved its needle end into the creature's thorax, just below its grapefruit-sized head. It had time to strike, but it hesitated. Sean squeezed the wirepoint burner and the thing's body exploded in a hot blue flaming death. Damp pieces of it struck his face and clung there.

He tossed the wirepoint to Rachel. She bobbled it and it fell to the ground. She dived and rolled, retrieving it and firing from one knee, driving the buggers back toward Mead's body. Gruber saw what she was trying to do, and set up a crossfire. In moments, all of the living buggers were gathered around the corpse.

Sean leveled his wirepoint at the milling buggers and fired. With the others, he burned away until nothing remained but a pile of ashes and the partial remains of Mead's skeleton. A few of the buggers had attempted to escape, scuttling up the same ropy strands they had come down, but Gruber picked most of them off. Others tried to limp away on scorched limbs. They were quickly killed.

In the roiling black smoke and the ghastly stench, the three survivors advanced toward the burnt area and fired until even Mead's charred bones were gone. Only then did they stop.

The jungle was silent; the only sound was their heavy breathing as they surveyed the carnage. All three of them were dripping with sweat. Runnels of perspiration ran down their limbs and torsos, soaking their regulation kilts and filling their boots.

Sean felt ill. He put his hands on his knees and retched violently. He could not vomit; there was nothing in his stomach. Rachel went to him and touched his shoulder, where he had been bitten.

"It didn't break the skin," she said.

He stood up weakly and wiped his bearded chin.

"Andy," he said, his voice rasping.

"That's right, Callahan," Gruber said. "He's dead."

"You say that like you think it was my fault. But I warned you they'd organize."

"If we weren't on this world, the whole crew would be alive," Gruber replied. "Don't you remember who brought us here, *Captain?*"

"Stop it!" Rachel screamed. She trembled with rage; her dark Russian eyes filled with anger. Gruber turned sullenly away, however, before the tears started to roll down her cheeks.

Sean put out his hand and stroked her hair. "I never dreamed there would be so many of them," he said. "Poor Andy."



"One more dead," Gruber said, his back to them.

Rachel wiped her face with her hands, making smudges of grime under her eyes. "You were right," she told Sean. "They were waiting for us."

"They hit us when we weren't ready," he replied. "A massed attack. They must be intelligent."

"Right," Gruber said, drawing out the word sarcastically.

Sean looked at the big man. "It was a planned attack," he said firmly. "I'm sure of it."

"Just because a bunch of them jumped us doesn't prove anything," Gruber said, turning to sneer at him.

"They were organized," Sean insisted.

"Ants organize. Termites organize."

"Not like this — attacking when the enemy is unprepared."

"Coincidence," Gruber said.

"They formed an army to prevent us from destroying their environment. They scouted us and caught us with our pants down."

"You can't be serious," Gruber said. "A life-form with built-in weapons like that would never have to develop any kind of reasoning ability, Callahan. It's common sense, the way of the Universe."

"Our universe," Sean replied. "But this isn't our universe."

"We don't know that," Gruber

said, but his tone was no longer argumentative.

"The life here is basically different from what we're familiar with," Rachel said. "It's organic, but that's where the similarity ends. Things have evolved along different patterns than the ones we know."

Gruber snarled. "The filthy things. The filthy goddamn things." He spat into the heap of ashes. "Nothing more than glorified army ants."

"Well," Sean said. "It won't do us any good to stand here arguing about it."

"Javak will be wondering what's taking us so long," Rachel said. "Wouldn't want him to worry."

"He'll worry if I ever get my hands on him," Gruber said, reaching down to straighten the partially spilled sack of herbicide and savagely twisting its end.

"If we hurry we can set up the rest of the misters before dark." Sean picked up Mead's sack, putting the mister he had used to kill the bugger inside, after wiping the tool on his kilt.

Rachel tucked the remaining sack under her arm as Gruber hoisted the herbicide onto his broad back. The three of them set off into the crawling forest.

No one looked back.

In the dimming light, Rachel, Gruber and Sean came out of the jungle. Before them, a collapsible structure stood in the clearing: a cube, surrounded by sundry articles and conveyances to assist in the destruction of the jungle. They walked slowly toward it, exhausted by the shock of Mead's death and the day's labors, still carrying the sacks. Only Gruber's burden had become lighter as the day wore on, since they used herbicide every time they planted a mister. Sean suspected Gruber derived a certain grim satisfaction from coming back with less than he started out with.

"Nice to see they're waiting for us," Rachel said. "It makes me feel wanted."

"Please, Rachel," Sean said, and instantly regretted his words; she had been through a day every bit as trying as the one he had been through, and she had done it without complaining. She was entitled to a little relief through sarcasm. He had become short with her of late, perhaps because snapping at her was the only outlet he had for his frustration and bitterness . . . or perhaps it was only because he knew she loved him, and resented it because he did not know how to deal with it.

"I'm sorry," she replied.

"For what? Say whatever you like." He noticed that there was no

one around the hut. That was unusual. He looked back at Rachel. "It was rude of me to say that," he said, as sincerely as he could.

She averted her eyes, embarrassed. To change the subject, she asked him, "Why do you think they're making us clear this land, Sean?"

"I don't know," he said. They had discussed it a thousand times, but he didn't say so. "I haven't come up with any new theories. It could be a town, or a military base, or something with a purpose we would never dream of."

The flickering atmospheric light had dimmed, giving the landscape the illusion of being even more lush than it actually was. A thousand subtle colors played on the rich blues and greens and purples of the moving jungle, giving it a much richer appearance than in daylight.

Daylight, Sean thought. He wished he could think of a better word for the brilliant coruscation that filled the sky. His train of thought was disturbed by movement in the shadows inside the entrance to the cube-shaped hut.

Javak.

Slender torso swelling respirationally, the alien figure emerged into the light, muttering incomprehensibly in his own language. As the humans approached him, he extended a six-fingered hand toward them, indicating that they should turn their wirepoints over

to him. He knew they would oblige him, and had no fear of reprisal; the power source of the wirepoints was somehow always cut off before his captives were within firing range.

How Javak knew when they were coming was the subject of much speculation. The power source itself they believed to be the same that fed the prod, which had been used to teach them their job through a kind of trial-and-error negative reinforcement. They had learned very fast with it, and, of course, it still kept them in line when they were working.

"Maybe he forgot to turn off the power just this one time," Gruber said, hesitating to give Javak his weapon.

"Don't try anything," Sean said. "Remember what happened the last time you upset him."

"That's *exactly* what I'm thinking about now," Gruber replied. But he reluctantly handed his wirepoint over.

Calcium-plated planes, forming an intricate pattern on Javak's head, vibrated as his oral cavity worked, revealing the soft, pink material of his palate. Jade eyes flashed as he spoke in a staccato hum. Through his transparent flesh the pulsations of his internal organs could vaguely be seen.

Javak looked like a man with glass skin. Not really a man, of course, nor a "he." There were no genitalia evident; the only reason

the humans had for referring to him in the masculine gender was that his bass, humming voice sounded most unfeminine — that and his size. Javak was a full two meters tall when standing erect.

"I wonder what the hell he's saying," Sean said, keeping an eye on the clucking alien. "All this time and I still haven't picked up a word."

He watched Javak gesture expansively, chattering in short, droning bursts of varying pitch and intensity, pointing ambiguously at the sky. The only other time Sean had ever seen the alien so excited was when they were trained in the blistering heat. Javak had been merciless; if not for the intervention of one of his assistants they might very well have all died of thirst.

The assistant who had given them water that day came out of the hut and joined his master. He stood back obsequiously and listened as Javak sounded off about whatever it was that excited him so. Sean was certain Javak addressed this one as "Gifon," phonetically. The names of these two beings, along with a few other words, was all he had learned of the alien language (aside from the theory that persons were called by two syllables and things by three, but he was not certain of this). But he was determined to get through to them somehow, to make them see their similarity to their cap-

tives. If he could do that, he was sure Javak would free them, perhaps take them back to wherever he and his assistants had come from, or even send them home. Communication looked like the best chance they had.

"They seem to be happy today," Rachel said. "I wonder what they're talking about?"

"Maybe they're saying it's time for a little food and rest for their slaves," Gruber said.

"Rest?" Sean replied. "I believe you're dreaming already."

Gruber stiffened.

"I didn't mean anything, Frederic," Sean said. "It's just that they usually take their time about feeding their pets. I wasn't making fun of you."

Gruber turned away.

"All this talk about rest and dreams is torture," Rachel said. "I wish I could lie down and go to sleep right now."

"Something to eat first," Sean said.

"I'm not very hungry."

"You should eat anyway," Sean said. "They won't give us another meal until we're finished with our work tomorrow."

"I'd just like to get some sleep."

"I'd just like," Gruber said suddenly, "to sleep *with* you. Goddamn Javak."

Rachel remained silent. Though she wouldn't have offered herself to Gruber even if she could have, she understood. Since the begin-

ning, Javak had not allowed any sexual activity. If something started, the prod quickly put a stop to it. There was no unnecessary touching.

"Don't think about sex, Gruber," Sean said. "It only makes things worse."

Javak stared at them through bright green eyes, his facial plates vibrating with some unknown emotion.

"I know what he's saying," Rachel said, deadpan. "He says he won't use the prod anymore, if he can join in the fun. The trouble is, he can't decide which one of us he wants."

Sean laughed in spite of himself.

At the sound of the laughter, Javak and Gifon both swung their armored heads around as if they were on swivels. Javak flew into a series of strange vocal patterns, of a kind Sean had never heard before. The alien had never acted quite the same way twice in front of his captives. Sean made a mental note of the outburst. It could, conceivably, help him in his search for the key to the alien language.

Javak finally calmed himself, after considerable effort, suggesting even more strongly to Sean that he really had lost control of himself for a moment. Or was he anthropomorphizing the alien, Sean wondered, imposing human-like behavioral patterns where there there really were none? "Did they react to my laughter?" he

asked the others. "Or was it just...?"

"I think they did, Sean," Rachel said. "I really think they did."

A third alien came out of the shack, bearing two large bowls in his strange hands (four digits in the middle with two thumbs on each hand — the thumbs were not flexible, but swiveled in any direction as if mounted on ball-joints). As Javak chattered at him, he handed one of the bowls to Rachel and one to Gruber.

Was this significant too? Sean wondered. Did the aliens perceive the difference, subtle as it was, that his authority as Captain gave him? Was that why they always fed his subordinates first? He watched Javak go inside the shack, garulously clucking at the assistant who had brought out the food.

Gifon did not follow the others immediately, but stayed outside, his inscrutable green eyes studying Sean, Rachel, and Gruber. After a few moments he turned abruptly and went inside.

"There's a quality about him," Rachel said. "He watches us in a way that Javak doesn't. I think he wants to talk to us."

Gruber grunted and said, "Let's eat."

In one of the bowls was a mixture of fruit and nuts. In the other was a potable liquid: water laced with a sweet flavoring. There was no meat; Javak and his minions were vegetarians. Gruber had once

killed a small, hairless creature with dainty paws, bringing its carcass back to butcher and eat. All he received for his pains, however, was a jolt from the prod.

"You know what you were saying about their language, Callahan?" Gruber said, easing himself down to a sitting position, back against the neat collapsible structure. "I think I'm beginning to understand a few words, but it doesn't matter. They aren't interested in talking to us." He picked out a slice of soft yellow fruit and popped it into his mouth. The fact that it was part of an organism that had recently been crawling around like an earthworm didn't disturb him; he ate with relish.

"I thought I was beginning to pick up a little bit of it, too," Sean said. He suspected that Gruber was trying to upstage him. Knowing that Sean thought the route to their salvation would be found by cracking the alien tongue, Gruber might try to convince Rachel that he had succeeded where the Captain had failed. She was, after all, the only remaining member of the crew he had always wanted so desperately to command. Irrational, but Sean wouldn't put it past Gruber. "I even tried to talk to Gifon," Sean continued, "but I didn't get anywhere."

"I think we lack something essential for an understanding of their language," Rachel said.

"You may be right," Sean

replied. "Pronunciation might not be enough — they may be espers. In any case, I wonder if we're even pronouncing their names correctly. It seems almost impossible to duplicate the sounds they make, doesn't it?" He paused to raise the bowl of water to his lips.

"What did Gifon do when you tried to talk to him?" Rachel asked.

Sean set the bowl down and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Considerably refreshed by the drink, he said, "He looked at me and sort of burped out a few syllables in a, uh, a fugue pattern, I suppose you could call it."

"A fugue pattern?"

"Yes. Repetitions, in an almost musical rhythmic sequence. I thought he was upset at first, but he didn't do anything."

"It's a good thing you didn't try to talk to Javak," Rachel said. "He would have probably given you a shock from the prod for your trouble."

"That's right," Gruber said. "Remember what you said in the jungle, Callahan? About the buggers playing cat and mouse with us? Well, they're not the ones who are playing with us — it's Javak."

Sean didn't answer. He recalled the time Gruber had entered the hut during their first day of captivity. They did not even realize they were in captivity at the time. It was then that the prod was introduced to them. Since that incident they

had come to appreciate that the prod, whatever else it might be, was something far more powerful and sophisticated than they had at first imagined. They were continually given new evidence of its scope; it was not simply an alien cattle prod, that much was certain. Just what it was, however, remained a mystery.

Gruber had not forgotten. "If I knew how Javak works that thing," he said, "I'd turn it on him and make him squirm — then I'd kill him. He deserves to die for treating intelligent beings like animals."

"You're making a value judgment, Gruber," Sean said. "You were trained to never do that in regard to an alien culture's actions."

"That, you can be sure," Rachel said, "is taken directly from the book." She spoke in an exaggerated, clipped Russian accent.

Her mocking reprimand made Sean stop lecturing Gruber. It was her way of reminding him that the need for any stance as the official Captain/Authority Figure no longer served any useful purpose.

"There *is* one problem with the book," Gruber said. "It talks about an alien *culture's* actions. That's because the Terra-trippers back home who wrote it never saw an alien, outside of an official function or in a holo-flash. If you've never been around sentient aliens on one of their own worlds, you have no way of knowing

they're individuals, capable of anything."

"That's true," Sean replied. "But still —"

"Still we have to look at them as if they were laboratory specimens, as we die one by one. We must remain detached while they play cat and mouse."

"We should try to be objective," Sean said. He was not willing to admit much.

"You didn't look very detached this morning, when they made you dance like a puppet," Gruber taunted.

"I'm not very detached now, either," Sean said. "But I'm trying not to lose control of myself."

"Perhaps that's a good idea," Gruber replied. "You do lose control rather easily, don't you?"

"Yes," Sean said. "I'm quite a violent person in my way, even though I try not to be." There was an undeniable note of menace in his voice.

Gruber never got very far when baiting Sean. He had learned to anticipate the eventual turning around of each of their debates, and always ceased at or about that point in the discussion. He forced a cough and turned his head so that his hairless cheek was pressed against the smooth, hard side of the shack. He pretended to fall asleep.

Sean and Rachel continued eating.

The words he had just had with

Gruber did not disturb Sean, past their existence as sounds. He was thinking instead of the darkening jungle as he chewed slices of fruit that oozed with thick juices. There had once been jungles on Terra. He remembered reading about them as a boy. Of course, the earthly jungles did not have much in common with the crawling mass of green that surrounded them. But they had been jungles, vast and untamed, like this one in a general kind of way, he thought, if not in detail.

While those wild places still flourished on Terra, great cities had simultaneously existed. In one or two cases, a city had actually survived on the very brink of the jungle. Manaus, on the Amazon River, had been a fabulous, thriving metropolis a thousand miles from any settlement. Perhaps the aliens were involved in an attempt to create such a city. Or perhaps they were leveling the jungle to extend some great city lying behind them, making new room for its teeming population to breathe in.

If he and Rachel and Gruber could reach such a city, he thought, they might find some way out of the bondage they had unwittingly stumbled into after their forced landing on the planet.

It was a nice fantasy, anyhow, Sean told himself as he closed his eyes. He would sleep on it, and hope that reality did not intrude on his unlikely dream of freedom.



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Sean knew that he was dreaming, yet his dream was all he knew; it was all he had ever known, or would ever know.

His dream was not a dream of freedom, as he had hoped, but of darkness. And even though he was strangely aware of the fact that it was not real, he fell into it, so concrete, even visceral, was it; so complete, so pitilessly eternal, so terribly, terribly empty. It was devoid of light and warmth.

Death.

After an eternity, the ineffable blackness was disturbed by a force, its cold hollowness pierced by immeasurable energy. It rapidly came closer. Oddly, he knew that whatever was intruding into his dream came from outside his mind . . . and yet was in it. Espers? He recalled the feel of the mind-music of the Aurigaeans, the most accomplished espers man had ever found. What they did was a parlor trick next to this searching thing that filled his sleep.

Something touched him. A genuinely physical sensation, a nudge, entirely outside his dream.

He opened his eyes and saw a six-toed foot. For a moment he was afraid, thinking it belonged to Javak. But why would Javak come alone to see him in the dead of night? He raised his head to get a better look.

The dim, flickering nocturnal light illuminated the face of the alien towering above him. It was Gifon.

Relieved, Sean propped himself up on an elbow expectantly. Surely Gifon did not intend to harm him. . . . But what did he want? Rachel had suspected Gifon wanted to talk to them. Apparently she had been correct.

But how could they talk? Perhaps if Sean had an inkling of the alien language, it might make some sense. Unless, it occurred to him, Gifon had learned loglan. He listened hard. There was a soft murmuring sound, like the susurrations of the wind, or the cooing of doves.

Gifon lifted his left hand delicately, holding up a small object for Sean to see. It was a dark pyramidal shape, clearly outlined in the glimmering evening light. As the inhumanly large hand descended, its central four fingers lifted so the end digits alone held the object in the pincer-like grasp. Gifon wanted him to take the thing.

The murmuring sound came from the jungle, and not from Gifon at all, Sean realized as the alien's face came close to his. Gifon had some purpose other than talking in mind. Sean reached out and, after hesitating a few seconds, touched the dark pyramid. From it, he was positive, came the energy he had felt in his dream. The sensation was quite real, there

was no doubt of that; yet the object did not yield any tangible heat or light or pressure of any kind. He took it, feeling the surprising warmth of Gifon's hand as he did. He had not expected the alien flesh to feel so human; of course, he had never before touched one of them.

Gifon's intelligent, green eyes gazed first into Sean's eyes and then down at his hand. For a moment, Sean gripped the pyramid tightly, then slowly opened his fingers. He turned the tiny object with the index finger and thumb of his free hand. Each of the four sides, he saw, was a triangle of equal size and shape: a tetrahedron.

The thing was soft, yet inarguably firm. It fit easily in the palm of his hand, and had no appreciable weight. It was colorless against the auroral light.

It possessed one other quality Sean knew instinctively, quite apart from the evidence of his senses. He was certain of this quality, but did not understand why: it was alive.

There was a life-force trapped inside the tetrahedron. It touched him then at every level of his mind, in many ways, hungrily devouring what it found. With each passing moment, the strange communion broadened, as vistas of bizarre emotional intensity swept searchingly through him, leaving awe-some children to be born like eggs

hatching in his brain. But his brain was an instrument that seemed too primitive for these newborn. They could not survive long there, they told him, and fled back to their prison inside the tetrahedron. They were leaving, but they took a part of Sean with them. These infant things mingled with the searching force in a single, pulsing energy confined somehow to the tiny object in his palm.

Sean was left shaken and confused by the experience.

Gifon, his body foreshortened from Sean's perspective, rose and looked around apprehensively. He went around the corner of the shack and disappeared inside it.

Sean was left alone with the tetrahedron. Why, he asked himself, had Gifon given him such a thing? What was it? It seemed that the four triangles housed something incomprehensibly vast and powerful — elemental. His dream had perhaps hinted at its dynamics, but could never envision it in its entirety. What could *he* do with such a thing?

Maybe he could somehow harness some of its power, he thought. Perhaps it was similar to the thing that powered the alien machines; it might make the wirepoints work. He certainly had nothing to lose by keeping it. There was an inside pocket in his kilt that still had an intact zipper attached. He put the tetrahedron in and zipped up.

Lying down, he settled himself

as comfortably as he could on the hard ground and closed his eyes. He dozed within a few moments, almost certain he had only been dreaming, that the clandestine visit of Gifon had never actually taken place. He had to reach down and touch the bulge under his clothing to persuade himself that it had.

He was very tired, and soon fell into a deep sleep. In his dreams, he returned to the darkness. But this time he was not alone there.

5

A screeching, metallic sound split the air as the shack folded in on itself. As Sean, Rachel and Gruber loaded their sacks for the day's work, they watched Javak's four assistants, Gifon among them, flip the last panel over and carry the entire shack away like a piece of plate glass. The single sheet would later be transformed back into the hut, a structure large enough to accommodate five aliens, each larger than a human male. The aliens took this for granted, of course, since they seemed to violate the laws of spatial geometry every day. Bodily fluids rushing darkly under their transparent flesh, they strained to heave the collapsed shack onto the bed of a vehicle they used to transport themselves and their equipment. The conveyance was nothing

more than a skeleton: a few curved, metal ribs protruding from a central column shaped like a ski. Somehow, this fragile contraption supported the weight of all their equipment. How this was possible was as mysterious to the humans as its power source.

Sean believed it was powered by the same energy that flowed through the wirepoints, the same energy that controlled the prod. Furthermore, he suspected that the tetrahedron in his kilt might be akin to, possibly even identical to, the thing that made the alien technology work.

When Gruber had, out of curiosity, entered the shack, Sean remembered, he had seen nothing that bore the slightest resemblance to machinery, or electronic instrumentation of any kind. Furthermore, everything the aliens used was constructed crudely or sloppily, as if they had no need for efficiency or craftsmanship. If they had unlimited energy at their disposal — the living force trapped inside the tetrahedron, for example — they might very well be lazy. Indeed, he theorized, if they had constructed their machines only to channel energy that had been theirs for the asking, rather than discovering and painstakingly developing energy sources as man had done, they would never have had the need for craftsmanship, and minimum efficiency would be enough.

Sean felt better and better about having the tetrahedron. Gifon had apparently given it to him to help him.

The transport was loaded. Any minute, Javak would give them their wirepoints and the day's work would begin. Javak and the four assistants would ride to the edge of the next perimeter while Sean, Rachel and Gruber permeated the forest with herbicide.

In the distance, Sean could see Javak supervising the logistics operation, and heard the whine of the transport's engine as it was ignited by the unknown power source — the power of their minds directing a tetrahedron, Sean was almost certain. Javak was gesticulating irritably and shouting at his helpers, and distractedly stepped in front of the loaded machine. Abruptly it lurched forward, flattening him. His assistants ran to his aid, their excited voices humming like a swarm of bees, echoing back to the three humans.

For a moment, watching the busy tableau in the distance, Sean was silent. Then he realized what he was seeing. "This is our chance!" he shouted, hardly believing it.

Rachel looked at him blankly.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go for it."

"What about the prod?" Gruber demanded.

"Never mind the goddamn prod. They'll be too busy to notice

us for a few minutes. Let's go!"

"But as soon as they see we're gone they'll turn it on."

Sean glanced back nervously at the figures milling around the transport. Clearly, Gruber was afraid. Sean wanted to tell him about the tetrahedron, but there was no time. "For Christ's sake, it's worth the risk," Sean told him. "We may never get another chance."

"We might not, Gruber," Rachel said.

"I don't know," Gruber replied, shaking his head.

"We'll double back, keep changing our direction," Sean said, desperately trying to convince Gruber; if they waited much longer they would never make it. He felt like leaving Gruber behind, but knew they couldn't afford to. "Look, even if they locate us and turn the prod on, we might be far enough away to resist it by that time."

Gruber's eyes shifted away from Sean and toward the group around the skeletal contraption a hundred meters away. "All right," he said. "I'll go." He looked at Sean once more, his face expressionless.

"Come on then," Rachel said, as the assistants stood up the wobbly Javak. She started to run.

They sprinted for the jungle, fumbling with their sacks as they went. The lighter they traveled the faster they could move, Sean reasoned. "Keep one cutting tool," he said. "Throw the rest away when

we get into the jungle — but don't leave it where they can find it." He stopped talking, to catch his breath as he ran.

Ahead, the coiling green horror waited for them. In seconds they were engulfed in its shadows, off on an unlikely bid for freedom. Unlikely, but at last they had hope.

As he ran, Sean clutched instinctively at his hip, where his weapon would ordinarily be as he entered the jungle. It was not there. Javak had not yet armed them when the accident occurred. Instead of the wirepoint, his fingers touched a bulge in his kilt. It was the tetrahedron. With it, he did not feel totally helpless. There was an object of great power in his possession, if not under his control. He pumped his legs as hard as he could, until they ached with the effort.

He was far ahead of Rachel and Gruber when he was forced to slow down by the increasingly thick undergrowth. Tendrils flicked out and stung his sweaty legs, and snaking roots tripped him. In a moment the others caught up to him.

"Are we going back in the direction of the boat?" Rachel asked, puffing breathlessly.

"No," Sean said. "That would be too obvious. Besides, they might have salvaged the boat, for all we know."

"What then?"

"We'll double back around the

edge of the clearing, just inside the jungle," he replied. "That might fool them, and it might lead us . . . somewhere. Anyway, I have a feeling there's nothing but more jungle ahead."

"What if we run into some buggers?" Gruber asked. "What can we do without our wirepoints?"

"They won't attack us if we're not defoliating," he said. "Not while we're on the run."

"That's assuming they're intelligent," Gruber replied. "And if they are, they might try to kill us for revenge."

"Let's not forget that looping plant that brought the boat down, or the flying thing; it might swoop down and gobble us up," Sean said angrily. "Not to mention the bubbles."

"What are you trying to do, Callahan?" Gruber demanded, blue eyes blazing with hate.

"I'll tell you what I'm doing," Sean said. "I'm telling you to stop whining, or, so help me, we'll leave you right here!"

Gruber glared at him, snapping off a branch and crushing it as it writhed underfoot. He didn't answer.

"All right then," Sean said. "Let's get cracking." He started to hack away at a thicket of twitching fibers. "If we cut across and stay near the defoliated areas we might be able to grab some discarded

items. We might find something useful."

Rachel and Gruber looked dubious, but they pushed on, carving their way through the crawling foliage until their hands were bleeding from the retaliation of the dying plants; when damaged, the branches fought back.

Occasionally an animal would appear fleetingly against the undulating trees, easily identifiable as it darted rootlessly here and there. Soon its furtive eyes would pick the three humans out of the vertiginous background, and it would disappear as quickly and quietly as it had come. The animals were pink, naked things, huge rat-like creatures with round faces and drooping eyes, or smaller, gentler beasts with smooth hides, like the one Gruber had once killed.

"I don't think you'll be able to bring one of them down without a wirepoint," Rachel said to Gruber. "They move fast."

Gruber nodded in agreement. He opened his mouth to speak, but he said nothing. Instead, his jaw twitched and he gaped, his mouth of control. His eyes widened and bulged grotesquely — the prod.

The others could feel it, too. Rachel doubled over with pain, crying. Sean threw back his head, clenching his teeth so hard they made a grating noise. The tendons and veins in his neck stood out in relief as he strained against the torment.

"Jesus God!" Gruber screamed. The prod had never been this fierce, the pain never this intense.

"Run!" Sean shouted from the depths of a terrible spasm.

Rachel was looking at him helplessly. Her hands were outstretched, palms up. A gurgling sound escaped her throat.

Sean reached out and took hold of her hand, yanking her along as he began to run, awkwardly at first, then, in spite of the pain, more surely. They gathered speed, anguish welling in the backs of their skulls like burning lava. Gruber was close behind them, gasping and stumbling, falling and picking himself back up, as he tried to control his body over the raging fire in his brain. There was no relief — the pain did not come in waves, or spurts; it flooded the insides of their heads and seemed to set fire to every nerve in their bodies.

Somehow they kept going through it all, even when the plants clustered so thickly that they could barely move. Then they hacked away at the wriggling things until they were able to continue.

They came to the rotting hulk of a dead tree. Somewhere in the inferno inside his skull, Sean calculated that the edge of one of the clearings must be near. "Keep going," he said.

Gruber struggled to the two-meter-high decaying hulk and climbed up onto it. He braced himself and reached down to give the

others a hand. Inch long, grub-like monstrosities swarmed out of a nest in the tree, covering his boots and bare calves in an instant. Gruber ignored the repulsive things and pulled Rachel up first, then Sean. The three of them leaped over to the other side of the dead tree, brushing the crawling things off frantically.

Sean thought he felt a lessening of the pain. "I think we're going to make it," he said. "Keep moving."

"Yes," Rachel said, tears of relief mingling with tears of pain and the gleaming sweat on her delicate face.

In front of them a single bare hill rose out of the squirming vegetation like an exposed breast. They jogged tiredly to the top of it. The pain lessened bit by bit as they stumbled down the far side of the hill and kept going. Within a few meters the pain became negligible; in another hundred, imperceptible.

Sean stopped running, his lungs ready to burst, every nerve in his body tingling with relief. He laughed and embraced Rachel, lifting her bodily off the ground and kissing her happily. He let her down and turned to Gruber, slapping the big man on the back. He danced from one foot to the other, hysterical, ecstatic.

Gruber fell down, exhausted. Throwing back his heavy blond head, he began to laugh too, uproariously.

Struck by the sight of the normally dour Gruber howling with laughter, Rachel giggled. In a moment she was laughing heartily with them, child-like, amazed that they had escaped. Delighted by it, in fact. She sank to her knees, quaking with joy.

"Come on, now," Sean said. "Don't lie down, or you won't be able to move in a few minutes." His own muscles were cramped and aching from the tremendous physical strain.

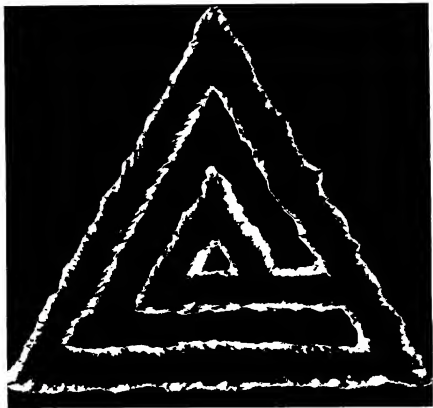
Gruber sobered, his blue eyes darting from Rachel to Sean. "I'm all right," he said, rising. He faced Sean, eye to eye, his head ever so slightly bowed. "Sean," he said quietly, "I..." He paused, then grinned. "We made it."

"Looks like it," Sean said, returning the grin. "That must be the clearing over there," he continued, indicating a place where the light played through the trees. "Let's take a look."

Rachel rose, and the three of them advanced cautiously. There was indeed a clearing beyond, replete with bushes, neat shrubs and fantastically large blue flowers growing in triangular patches.

In the center of the exotic landscaping was a structure. It was not like the collapsible shack, but a conical frustum with half a dozen rectangular shafts projecting upward from it.

Sean looked at Rachel and Gruber, both of whom appeared to



be as puzzled as he was. Could this be one of the areas they had cleared since they began their work? Had they been on this planet that long? He stepped out of the jungle gloom and into the glimmering light, the others behind him.

The place was unnaturally silent, Sean thought as they went farther and farther into the open. He hesitated and glanced around. No movement.

Then, across the ground ran a shadow, gliding smoothly toward them from the jungle.

"The flying thing?" Rachel asked in a whisper.

They looked up and saw it clearly at last. The flying thing was the group of aliens, the light at their backs making them look like moving stained-glass figurines. Around them was a series of metal rings, a sort of horizontal skeletal cylinder. There was nothing else.

Sean understood: the structure in the clearing was for the strange ring-ship to dock at; the ship itself, to watch them while they were in the jungle. It was all too clear. They had never had a chance.

Before they could move, the whole outlandish floating assemblage swooped down toward them. The aliens were suddenly just above, pointing their wirepoint burners menacingly, buzzing and clucking — a grotesque parody of human speech, Sean thought bitterly. What kind of mind could conceive such a cruel game?

Among the voices of the aliens, he heard a pleasant hum, conspicuous by the mellowness of its tone, in counterpoint to the staccato chattering of the others.

It was Javak.

Next to Javak was Gifon. Sean felt he knew what they were talking

about; they must have been amused at his reaction to the tetrahedron. The things that had hatched in his brain and fled back to the tetrahedron — “children,” he had thought of them — now provided a mental link between him and the aliens.

Javak knew his every thought.

Gruber had been right. It was the humanoids, not the buggers, who were enjoying a game of cat and mouse with them. And it wasn't over yet.

But it didn't matter, he realized as he watched Gruber dance spasmodically in the flickering light, like a puppet on a string with a horrible death's-head grin on his face.

He looked into Rachel's tearful eyes as a fire started in his brain.

TO BE CONTINUED

Come To Our Party!

Roger Zelazny, Kate Wilhelm, Harlan Ellison, Hal Clement, David DeWitt, and Timothy Robert Sullivan will all be there ... and we hope you will, too. The party is this November, when we mark the first anniversary of UNEARTH's publication. We'll be celebrating the event with a very special double issue, full of fiction, features — and a few surprises.

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It's an issue you won't want to miss. To reserve your copy now, use the subscription form on page 128.

LETTERS

Dear Mr. O-L:

Thanks for UNEARTH 3. (And for #2, which I'm not sure I acknowledged.) Your magazine keeps surprising me with its professionalism; it looks and reads more professional than more than one of our so-called "professional" s-f mags, and it puzzles me that some of your authors (I think particularly of Sucharitkul and Gibson in #3) have had any sort of difficulty getting their work published in more orthodox places. Your basic premise of operation still seems like an implausible formula for success to me, but somehow it's working. Congratulations.

All best,
Robert Silverberg

Dear Jonathan and John,

The quality of the writing in your issue #2 impressed me. Of the stories I've had time to read so far, "Tachyon Rag" was my favorite, not because of the nostalgia evoked by the Marx Brothers or Looney Tunes (I was never a big fan of either), but because of the imaginativeness and narrative style. "Garden Gate" was my second favorite; although I guessed pretty much what was to happen early on, I did feel the atmosphere created by the author was very well done.

"Man in Vacuum" was the first one I read. The suspense was well executed, which made for an enjoyable story, though I did find the ending a wee bit too corny. "Nocturne" struck me as having the mark of "professionalism" (an opinion either supported or clouded by your biographi-

cal notes on Frieze), though the ending left me unsatisfied. I read sections of "The Symbol Hunter," thought the approach interesting, but have not gone back to reading it as it should be read. Looking forward to "Proof" (read the Introduction only). Liked the Letters section, A. J. Budrys' in particular.

Overall, the parts of the issue that I read I definitely enjoyed. Thank you. Enclosed is my check for a one year subscription.

Sincerely,
Irene E. Steele

Sirs:

I have read and enjoyed UNEARTH 1 and 2 very much. It seems to me that there must be a large number of stories around that are worth reading and publishing. The number of markets is regrettably small.

I do hope you can make your magazine go. The first two issues confirm the availability of the stories; the question is the support from readers.

In any case, whatever happens to your magazine, "The Symbol Hunter" was marvelous, and I fully intend to nominate it for a Hugo next year.

Sincerely,
David L. Travis

Thanks to the many readers who share your enthusiasm for what we're doing, UNEARTH is succeeding even beyond our expectations. The next step in our growth will be November's First Anniversary Issue, which will be the biggest UNEARTH yet. Details on this special double issue can be found elsewhere in this issue.

— J O-L

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